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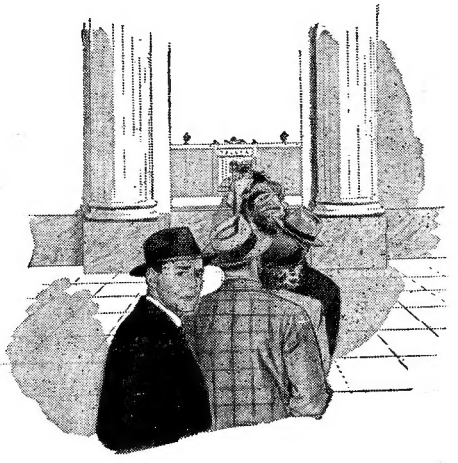

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Vol. 6, No. 6 April, 1949

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WESTERN SHORT STORIES is published bi-monthly by INTERSTATE PUBLISHING CORP. Office of Publication: 350 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y. Application for second-class entry under the Act of March 3, 1879, pending at the Post Office, N. Y., N. Y. Additional entry at Springfield, Mass. Copyright 1949 by INTERSTATE PUBLISHING CORP., 350 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y. Vol. 6, No. 6, April 1949 issue. Price 25c per copy. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts. Printed in U.S.A.

# The man who chose to FIGHT

By HENRY LONG

**Billy Forrest was the one with Colt-magic and muscles of steel, but the rangehogs thought it was his brother Clem who did all the fighting . . .**

CLEM was the oldest one. Clem was always belting somebody. Somebody was always saying something, like calling somebody a stinking Chink, or a stinking Mex, and Clem would do something about it.

Like the day at the Diamond Star, the only saloon in Presby. Presby was a pretty good town, most folks would have said, as falsefront towns went, it only had the one small saloon, and it had a church, and a legally elected sheriff, but Clem Forrest claimed it was a pretty rotten town.

Clem was thinking about that again the day at the Diamond Star. How Presby was a comparatively respectable cowtown

and all that, but it was still rotten. A town that had leading citizens that called people stinking Chinks or stinking Mexes, Clem claimed was a rotten town.

Alton Morgan had come into the Diamond Star. Not for a drink, oh no. Alton Morgan was one of the biggest cattlemen on this range. He was one of the pillars of the town. Alton Morgan came into the Diamond Star, and he squinted hard in the darkness of the place after the flat slab of dazzling sunlight that lay up and down the main street, and when the spots had jumped away from in front of his eyes finally and he'd found Ed Graham, the bartender, down at the far end of the bar, he growled:

"Who's bringing all the stinking Chinks into Presby, Ed? Are you and your crowd in here bringing them in? We don't want any stinking Chinks in Presby."

Ed Graham had a sort of amorphous face and his lips were in a sort of per-

"Let's make a run for it!" Clem shouted. "It's our only chance!"

**Gripping Fast-Action Saga of a Doomed Range's Six-Gun Redemption!**

manent pout which stuck out farther when he said something. He took another wipe at the bar he'd been washing and he said:

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Morgan, my crowd in here. I ain't got no crowd in here—"

Morgan gave his head and mouth an impatient twist. He made another clearer motion with his head toward the two or three customers who were at the tables, a motion that also included Clem Forrest, who had his long fingers around a whiskey glass down around the bend in the bar.

"These hangers-on that are always in here drinking," Morgan said loudly, "what do they do for a living? Gamble, probably—"

"We don't allow no gambling in the Diamond Star, you know that, Mr. Morgan," Ed Graham interposed.

"All right, they don't gamble. That's just what I'm saying, what *do* they do for a living? Bring in these stinking Chinks, that's what they do!"

Alton Morgan fastened his fierce gaze on Clem Forrest when he said this. His eyes had become fully accustomed to the darkness of the saloon, and he had recognized Clem and a savage gleam of satisfaction had come into his eyes.

One of the men at the tables had got unsteadily to his feet and burbled:

"I take issue with that remark o' yourn, mister. I ain't never been no gamblin' man, mister—"

"Shut up!"

Morgan had barked the order at the man but had returned his gaze immediately to Clem Forrest.

CLEM had been looking at Alton Morgan ever since Morgan had come in. Clem had not taken his fingers from around his whiskey glass on the bar and he had not taken his eyes off Alton Morgan.

As if he couldn't wait any longer for the response he had tried to stir in Clem Forrest, Morgan suddenly snarled at Clem:

"I'll wager, Clem Forrest, that you're the gent who's been importin' the Chinks! You're always goin' around blabbin' a lot of loco blab, I'll wager you found those Chinks squattin' out in the hills an' you invited them to make themselves at home in Presby!" Morgan sucked in a breath and went on fiercely: "Probably you even been feedin' 'em! Somebody's been feedin' 'em, because ain't nobody in Presby would hire 'em, an' livin' in that shack down at the end of town like they been doin', they sure ain't got a great deal of dinero!"

Usually Morgan kept his talk fairly high-tone, but when he got riled, he fell into the dialect of the cow-nurse, which Alton Morgan had thirty years before been, before his climb to wealth and power.

"Presby ain't going to stand much more of your foolishness, Forrest!" Morgan screamed on when Clem did not reply, for his voice had indeed reached now and then the pitch of a scream. "The people of Presby are gettin' fed up to the gills with your damn drunken blabbin', I'm tellin' you!"

Ed Graham stood there as though paralyzed in the middle of a wipe at the bar. He'd never seen Morgan take on like this. He'd known that Morgan did not take very kindly to Clem Forrest, due mainly to the fact that Clem Forrest bucked practically every civic "reform" that Morgan backed, exposing it always in a very loud voice for the self-interested play that it always was, but this looked like something new, like Morgan was dead set finally on an all-out showdown with Clem.

Ed Graham gulped to clear his dry throat and began: "Ain't no call to take on so, Mr. Morgan—"

"Shut up! You'll keep your face out of this!" Morgan had actually blown Ed Graham back on his heels with the fury of this blast.

Clem Forrest spoke then. Not tensely, not in any timing with this thing at all; he spoke simply as if an idea relative to it had just at that moment occurred to him and he had simply expressed it.

"In one breath you say that we Dia-

mond Star hangers-on are making our livings bringing in stinking Chinks," Clem Forrest said, "and in the next breath you say that nobody in Presby would hire them. And in still another breath you say that we Diamond Star hangers-on make our living gambling, when there hasn't been any gambling allowed in Presby for over three years. You don't make much sense, Morgan. Before you decide to go out and shoot off your head like this, you ought to try to think out what you're going to say a little better."

"I'll make sense, Forrest!" Morgan yelled, leaning toward Clem threateningly. "You don't need to worry about me making sense! I'll make sense, plenty of sense, when I call a meeting of the decent folks in this town and show them that it's time you were run out of this town for good, Forrest!"

Clem kept on observing Morgan. He looked down at his whiskey glass, turned it a bit in his fingertips and lifted it and tossed it off quickly.

"Look at yuh! Standin' there in the middle of the day soppin' up whiskey!" Morgan's verbal attack was moving him, as though on its momentum, ever closer to Clem Forrest. "The decent folks of this town'll dump you an' them stinkin' Chinks into a freighter an' ride you out of town so fast you won't know what hit you! I'll make plenty of sense before I'm through with you, Forrest!"

SO that was how it built up. Actually, it wasn't the build-up that mattered. Anybody who had seen Clem Forrest around would have known that the thing was set from the first time Alton Morgan uttered "stinking Chinks"; Clem Forrest never let that remark pass unattended.

Clem Forrest's big right fist was suddenly in the middle of Alton Morgan's wrath-twisted face like a bolt of lightning. Nobody really saw Clem come around the end of the bar, nobody could have been sure that he saw Clem's fist arrive.

The first Ed Graham and the men at the tables knew, Alton Morgan was leaving the Diamond Star through the bat wings hind end to. And Clem Forrest was bringing his big fist down from up near the ceiling somewhere, where the terrific uppercut had practically taken it.

Alton Morgan bounced down the veranda steps backwards like a wet bale of hay.

Ed Graham's mouth hung open, so that it seemed to hang lower than his chin.

The three men at the tables were on their feet watching Morgan leave.

Clem Forrest said, "There is a really low gent."

Alton Morgan's stetson was still rolling in the dust of the street. Alton Morgan's guns dumped half out of their holsters as he came to rest at the foot of the veranda steps.

ED FORREST was the second eldest Forrest boy, and Billy Forrest was the kid.

A person would not have thought this was the order of their seniority if a person had seen Ed and Billy waiting there at the Forrest place that evening.

Because young Billy was the one wearing the deepest frown, and Ed was standing there in the doorway just behind Billy looking more like Clem's father must have looked back in the days when Clem used to come home after a particularly wild stretch along the dark trails. than like Clem's next younger brother.

Clem was the tallest one. He had the typical Forrest long, creased face, like their father and grandfather and great-grandfather, and the beginning of baldness that made his high forehead look still higher. And a wide, flat mouth.

Ed Forrest was the one who looked least like a Forrest. He had a kind of lop-sided face, as though he'd perhaps originally had good features but a steer had given him a good kick since, which a steer might indeed have done.

And Billy Forrest looked like the people on their mother's side. He was the good-looking one. His big brown eyes, in fact, put him in danger, when he was a button, of being a pretty boy, and Billy

had been at pains ever since to disprove anything this might have indicated to anybody by becoming a dead shot with sixguns in both hands and building up under his rather soft tanned skin muscles of steel.

Old Dan Forrest had not worried about his three sons carrying on the Forrest place when he had died. His wife dying had taken a stiff cut out of old Dan, and he had moved on certainly much sooner than he might have otherwise, but Dan had not gone feeling any concern for his heirs: they, had been clearly implied in Dan's smile just before he died, were an all-right crew of lads; he had shaken each of their hands in those last minutes.

And that he gave no firmer, no longer handshake to any one of the boys than to either of the others, had been significant; for Dan had never known a feeling of favoritism for one of his sons over either of the others; he had never felt that he would leave the place in the hands of any one of them, to take over his place as head of the house. For the Forrest boys actually set in reverse the usual order of seniority in a family, with Billy the youngest yet the most serious of the three, with Ed the second eldest and certainly a steadier one than Clem, with Clem the big brother of the family but the wildest of the three. . . .

"Nice going," Ed greeted as Clem stepped down off his sturdy palomino, but Ed's tone and his expression did not give his words much literal meaning. "Very nice going."

Billy had given his head a brief shake, tightened in his lips.

"Boy," he said through his tight lips, "you're really starting to get hot now."

Clem bent the furrows that went down past his wide mouth out in sharp angles, in a pleasant smile.

"Greetings, gentlemen," he said.

Clem squeezed Billy's arm as he went past him up the steps of the veranda; he smiled especially at Ed.

"Very nice going," Ed repeated in measured tones, and not showing the least sign of returning Clem's pleasant smile, and keeping his eyes steadily on Clem.

CLEM had gone directly to the kitchen. He had reached down the big wooden box off the pantry shelf that he used to deliver the food every evening to the Chinese squatters, and he was already stowing bacon and bread and coffee into it, and he said quietly over his shoulder:

"Where are eggs, Ed? As I remember it, you were the lad who set out our breakfast this morning and put it away afterwards."

Ed was standing in the doorway of the kitchen now. He was shaking his head.

"You'll do those poor devils a bigger favor, Clem, if you go warn them to clear out of Presby this very night. Food isn't all a man needs to stay alive, you know."

Clem took a big bowl and looked toward Ed.

"The eggs, lad. All I want to know is where you cached the eggs."

"Clem," Ed went on almost before Clem had finished his brief sentence, "Morgan isn't going to play around this time. The town's in an uproar, which for some reason you don't seem to be aware of. After Morgan came to, he—"

Clem had ducked out the back door, beyond what Ed considered earshot. But Ed stood there in the kitchen waiting for Clem to come back in.

Billy was lighting a cigarette tensely in the big room. He shook out the match tensely and he tossed it into the fireplace. When he stopped his eyes from roaming around reflectively, he set them steadily gazing through the kitchen door.

Clem came back into the kitchen with eggs lined up and down his forearm two deep, grinning widely at Ed.

"Found a few myself. If you won't talk, lad, I'll try to manage on my own."

Ed rubbed one arm nervously with the big hand of the other.

"Oh I'll talk all right. I'm talking right now, and if you've got a brain cell left in your head, you'll listen to me—"

Billy had slammed his quirley into the

fireplace and he strode into the kitchen too.

"Clem, for heaven's sake! For heaven's sake, go tell those Chinamen to head for somewhere else while they're still able, and you take a trip somewhere for a couple weeks until this thing quiets down! You can go arrange that cattle sale with that gent in Grass City—"

"I did arrange that. That's where I was this afternoon," Clem said quietly, easing the eggs down his arm off the end of his long fingers into the crockery bowl without cracking a single one.

"And while you were doing that," Ed shouted, "Alton Morgan was screaming his head off up and down Presby demanding that you and the Chinamen be run out of town on a rail! I'm telling you, Clem, this isn't funny! Morgan is going to come after you this time, and not with a bunch of threats! He's got plenty of townsmen behind him—!"

"I can believe that," Clem humphed. He tucked the box of food under his arm and turned to face Ed and Billy, who blocked his way. "And now, gentlemen, if you will allow me—"

Billy's face was bloated purple.

He began in a terrible, trembling voice: "You — plain — damned — fool — you!"

Clem's face became serious, not actively so but serious, for the first time.

"Look, Billy," he said. "You don't lick a thing like this by running out on it when the showdown comes. These lads I'm taking this food to will run into the same thing wherever they go, you know that—and maybe somewhere else they won't have anybody to give them a hand." He paused for a split moment. Then he added: "Here they have us."

"Oh no they haven't got *us!*" Ed filled in fast. "Oh no! Billy and me ain't committing suicide just because we got a loco brother who thinks it would be a good idea for us all to commit suicide in a nice, little, cozy family group! Oh now!"

Billy gritted: "*Oh no* is right!"

Clem's calm grey eyes rested for a few moments on Billy's purple-with-rage features and on Ed's agitated mien.

After that interval Clem said quietly: "Okay, then they have me." He smiled in one corner of his mouth. "Out of my way, gentlemen."

Actually Ed and Billy did not move. Actually Clem went past them sideways.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Clem said. Out on the veranda he added in a slightly louder tone: "I'll be back in about an hour."

THE graybeard roared. And when this oldster roared, it was decidedly that. He was slumped back in the big wood-and-leather chair in the corner of the big kitchen, he was half sliding out of the chair, and he roared.

Kitty was standing in the doorway of the kitchen fingering a braided lariat, and she sort of half smiled, and looked down at the lariat, and look uncertainly up at Alton Morgan.

Morgan had finally whirled on the graybeard. Morgan had been all over the house all afternoon, inventorying guns, bullets, gun-belts, long rifles. He had called in all his riders and sent them to all corners of his place, "to be ready in case of reprisals." And then he had not said much, after that first purple speech.

He had looked funny to old Gary Morgan, and old Gary had been at no pains to conceal his amusement. He had looked funny thundering around looking out of his one good eye and the almost closed other eye. He still looked funny to old Gary, and the graybeard was not very disturbed when Alton whirled on him in unbridled rage.

"*Shut up!* —you damned whinnying old parasite goat!" Alton eyed the old man with his one good eye, and the effect was particularly fierce.

Then Alton added: "If you weren't my own kin, I'd have the mob freight you out of town along with the damned Chinks and that Forrest fool!"

"Oh father!" Kitty said to that.

"Shut up! *You'll* keep *your* mouth shut anyway!"

Kitty reddened, and she turned and left

the room. She went outside and she automatically walked toward the corral, and abruptly she entered the corral and moved her animal out. She threw herself up over its flank easily, and she rode out of the yard slowly.

She wasn't sure why she did this. It wasn't simply a matter of her feeling she was too old now to be treated like a kid in pigtails. It wasn't that she was annoyed at the way her father was carrying on about the squatters and Clem Forrest. It was perhaps these, but it was certainly more. It was perhaps a great many things coming to a head.

In any case, Kitty Morgan knew that she wanted to get away from her father's household at that moment. She wanted to do some thinking, she decided, though she was not sure what it was she wanted to think about. There were things she felt she had to get straightened out in her mind. . . .

"My father laughs at me, my daughter walked out on me!" Alton Morgan was raging. "Well, it's a good thing for this country that I'm big enough not to need my family behind me!"

He went out the front door leaning forward determinedly, and he yanked his horse out of the corral and he dumped a saddle on the animal, and moments later he was racing down the trail toward town.

He swung off in front of the hotel. The main street always got a quiet look at dusk, but this evening there was more than quietness, there was tenseness. Folks were all off the street at this hour usually, but both women and men could be seen this evening lurking in doorways, watching the hotel warily.

THE men who were in on Morgan's play had been riding into town from nearby ranches and hitching at the hotel rack for the past hour. A half dozen of them were on the veranda when Morgan stomped up the steps, a full dozen were inside in the lobby in an eddying cloud of cigarette and cigar smoke.

"We'll go out around by my place," Morgan growled as he entered the lobby. "Any of you who want a spare gun or some extra ammunition can take it there." Morgan paused in the middle of the lobby and he turned half around to survey the assembled company. "Okay," he said, a little self-conscious with the thing as were all the men there, "is everybody set?"

"All set, Alton," said one of the smaller ranchers who plainly enjoyed mouthing the first name of so important a local figure as Alton Morgan. He was a wiry, narrow-faced gent, and he had been talking up this thing ever since Morgan had ridden from ranch to ranch, personally, that afternoon and announced the time had come for action.

The men assembled ranged from this narrow-faced little gent to the big bluff rancher standing in the far corner of the lobby over beside the safe, and these gentlemen marked the extremes of the self-consciousness that pervaded the group: the wiry little gent was hardly uncomfortable at all, he was thoroughly interested in working on this thing, in taking orders from Alton Morgan and going the whole way with him; the big bluff gent was constantly shifting his feet with unease and uncertainty, for he'd come on to the hotel at the appointed hour not from much conviction about the Chinamen and Clem Forrest but rather because he didn't have much conviction about much of anything, only about making his ranch prosper and working with the right people therefore, so that he'd always have the best possible chance of making his ranch prosper.

And half of those in between were hired hands who might or might not have had any convictions but who first of all simply obeyed their boss' orders.

It was when Alton Morgan swung and stomped back out onto the veranda that he saw the rider coming into the town up at the high end. With the sun at the stranger's back, he was no more than a glowing silhouette, but even so there was that about him that immediately arrested Morgan's restless gaze.

The stranger was riding in quite

slowly. Morgan stopped in his tracks at the top of the veranda steps and he narrowed his eyes to better study the stranger.

The folks in the doorways had seen the stranger now too. Their gaze had moved from the hotel to the far end of town, and they too were narrowing their eyes now against the last rays of the sun to get a better view of the man. . . . .

BUT what is perhaps needed at this point is knowledge of certain events that occurred both simultaneously with and subsequent to the incident between Alton Morgan and Clem Forrest at the Diamond Star.

A rider had stepped down at the hitch-rack, for example, just at the moment when Morgan was ranting the loudest at Clem. The man had stood there and listened. He had covered this crudely by rolling and lighting a quirley.

Alton Morgan's hat had eventually rolled within inches of his boot-toe as he stood there. He had debated picking up Morgan's hat, or helping Morgan to his feet, but townsfolk had rushed too quickly to do those things.

The man was glad of this a moment later. Because he was thus able to step up onto his horse again and ride out of town again quite unnoticed.

This was not the same man that rode into Presby later. The man who rode into Presby that evening was this rider's leader. . . .

"Morgan, to my way of thinkin', ain't goin' tuh take that layin' down," the rider had said to his leader when he reached their badlands hideout.

Bailey Fowler had listened to his henchman's story of the Morgan-Forrest saloon incident quietly. He looked at the gunman carefully. He saw the canniness come into the gunman's eyes, and he knew the gunman had a special idea about this thing. Bailey Fowler had been considering for some time now making this youngster his right-hand man, because the kid was not only better than average with a gun but he had a head on him.

"So what," Bailey Fowler said softly, "does that mean to us?"

"Look. What's been keeping yuh from takin' over this country. Knowin' that if yuh attacked Morgan, the law would back him, every rancher in the state would back him, even the U.S. would mebbeso send in a marshal."

"So?"

"So here's your chance to attack Morgan inside the law. Civil war, it would be. Half the country backin' allowin' the Chinamen to stay, half the country backin' ridin' the Chinamen out." The kid was shaking out a match he'd just put to a quirley and he was squinting elaborately through the smoke. "Morgan—" the kid resumed, letting out a first long exhale to one side "—is backin' ridin' the Chinamen out, so we'd be backin' seein' them stay."

The edge of a smile had ridged Bailey Fowler's lips during this recital. It did not change now, but it did seem to spread to his eyes.

He said, "That is a very smart idea, son." He gave the smile full play now, favored the kid with it generously. "A very smart idea."

THUS it was that Bailey Fowler rode into Presby this evening. And that, to Alton Morgan and the townsfolk, Fowler looked like a stranger in the silhouette the setting sun cast on him. For Bailey Fowler was not well known in Presby. He'd brought his owlhoot crew up from the border nearly a year before, but he'd kept himself and his men out in the hills to the south of the town, with the exception of an occasional Saturday night foray into the saloon, when the swollen crowd and the smoke and hilarity made anonymity easy.

This pasear north was to be Bailey Fowler's graduation into the big-time. He'd scavengered the brimstone territory for ten years, learning his trade, and there he'd built up his crew. And then the time had come when Fowler chose to move north into the grasslands. He no longer wanted to rustle a few mavericks, raid a trailtown bank, strip a traveler

or a homesteader or a hopeful rancher of his meager starting stake. Bailey Fowler wanted to be a range king. His father had been a big-time gambler, until they'd dragged him off to boothill back-shot, and from him Bailey Fowler had inherited a fast gunhand and a smooth tongue.

But he had waited, carefully. He had studied the lay of things, and he'd watched for the chance to move in that he knew would have to come sooner or later. Bailey Fowler was not going to roar hell-for-leather into Presby and test the guns of his horde against all the steel that would inevitably be raised against him. When Bailey Fowler finally rode in to take Presby, he wanted the deck stacked.

The deck looked stacked to him now. . . .

"And who are you?" Alton Morgan thundered in strangely emphatic tones at Bailey Fowler when the outlaw stepped down at the hotel hitchrack. For somehow Morgan did not like this gent's arrival at this moment. He knew the man was no local rancher of his ken, and he wanted no intrusion on the hair-trigger temper of this play he'd whipped the ranchers up to.

Bailey Fowler put one black-shiny-booted foot on the bottom step of the veranda. He smiled thinly up at Morgan, as he leaned theatrically forward on the propped knee.

"I hear tell you and your friends are planning to run Clem Forrest off this range, along with the Chinamen who've moved in down at the end of town. I just wanted to warn you, Mr. Morgan, that Clem Forrest and the Chinamen have got friends."

Morgan's eyes had started to narrow at the outset of this speech, and they were almost tight shut at its conclusion.

"What friends?" Morgan snapped, but over a moment's hesitation. "His old man had friends on this range, but he's lost all of them with his loco antics. Even his own brothers won't back him in a showdown, I'll wager!"

Bailey Fowler held his thin smile, held his aslant look on Morgan's eyes. The outlaw sensed the townfolk's holding quiet up and down the street, to better hear this, he saw the ranchers move out onto the veranda, and he knew this was the moment to lay the firm foundation he wanted to build future events on.

"In the heat of your excitement, Mr. Morgan, I'm afraid you've forgotten just how big Presby range has grown. Maybe once you were a powerful figure in this country, and maybe even now some of the local folks jump when you crack your whip. But not all of the folks jump, Mr. Morgan, not all of them let you do their thinking for them.

"So like I say, whether you know it or not, Mr. Morgan, some of the folks on this range figure that those Chinamen have as much right to live in Presby as anybody else—and they're ready to back that idea with guns."

Alton Morgan tightened in his lips on his teeth. His pale blue eyes widened briefly and then narrowed again. "So Clem Forrest taught you one of his pretty little sermons, and sent you here to say it for him, eh," he said softly. "Friends, you say he's got, eh. Well, I happen to know every man who lives honestly on Presby range," Morgan had suddenly raised his voice to a shout, "and you're not one of them, stranger! I'll tell you what you are—you're a hired-gun that Clem Forrest has brought in to fight his battles for him! He's brought in Chinamen, and now he's bringing in owl-hooters!

"Well, chew on this, stranger. We expected Clem Forrest to pull something like hiring-on backshooters, and we're ready for him and for anybody who barricades up beside him! You can tell Forrest he's done on Presby—and if you got an ounce of sense, stranger, you'll ride out now in one piece instead of forcin' the men of Presby to wheel your carcass out in the same freighter with Forrest and his Chinamen!"

Neither Bailey Fowler's thin smile nor his position on the bottom step changed. He was a graceful man, and the soft grey Stetson and the silky tan trousers he

wore emphasized the relaxed lines of him.

He said, "You can't say now that you weren't warned, can you, Mr. Morgan."

IT was the first few bullets that saved Clem Forrest and his Chinese companions. They were like the startlingly hard opening drops of a sudden late summer shower, that give a man the moment he needs to duck for cover before the downpour is upon him.

So when the flat hot lead barrage tore through the flimsy shack it smashed harmlessly over the thrown-prostrate bodies of Clem and the others. A concentration of bullets, as though purposely, tore through the carton of food on the table that stood at the wall that was taking the broadside attack. An egg, released thus from the box, rolled toward the edge of the table, stopped as it touched a hunk of wood that a bullet chipped up directly in front of it, then blasted to nothing as another bullet took it full on.

Clem's eyes had fastened fascinated on this detail, as though it were somehow the core of the terrible thing that was happening. Fou Sun, a good-looking smooth-faced young man, studied Clem's face for an answer. A bullet whined nasally off an iron pot hanging on the far wall. Another bullet hit the center of it bull's-eye, and Clem knew from the vicious hardness of the blow that the barrage was being laid down with .30-30's. Yes, Clem thought bitterly, Alton Morgan had enough of the rifles in his back room to arm every man on Presby range twice around. Clem had seen the wall-long rack of the guns the one time he'd been in Morgan's house.

The other three Chinese were older than Fou Sun. Their faces were drawn into gullies, and their eyes carried the empty bleakness of men who have known little comfort and no family warmth. Yet they smiled at Clem when he looked at them. One of them had dived under the table. The other had arrived somewhat foolishly under the double-tiered bunks, so that his head was under the sideboard but the rest of him was sprawled exposed. The third was simply flat on the floor in the middle of the room beside Fou Sun and Clem.

Fou Sun said, "We should have gone, Clem." His voice had a very polite tone. Fou Sun was the educated one of the group; he had read a great deal in English, he'd told Clem, and he'd read aloud much of the time, and this had given him what sometimes sounded like an over-precise grasp of the language.

"Should have gone," the one with his head under the bunk echoed.

The fury of the barrage abruptly increased, to a point where Clem winced. He said to Fou Sun:

"That's what you've always done. That never got you anywhere."

"No, but at least then there was no trouble."

Clem said, "Are you afraid, Fou Sun?"

"Of course not, Clem. It is only that—"

"Then this time you're staying." Clem peered through narrowed eyes at the wall through which the steel was hammering. "It's funny, I know Alton Morgan is a fool—but somehow I wouldn't have figured he'd have done it this way."

"The people of Presby must be furious indeed on the question of our remaining on their range," Fou Sun said, also peering at the terribly riddled wall.

Clem was suddenly moving sidewise in a crab-like motion toward the door in the wall nearest him.

"Well, if they're starting this way," he gritted, "they'll follow it with torches." He reached the door and looked back at the others. "So this is what we do. I make a run for my horse, which should make them think that the rest of you are dead and bring them hot on my trail. At which time, you lads duck out the other door and make it as fast as you can for your old cave in the hills."

CLEM eased up off the floor into a crouch, fitted his long fingers carefully around the smooth-worn door handle, tried the clearance of the door across the warped floor boards. Then he'd flung the door wide and hurtled outside. He ran in a half crouch, but remained suffi-

ciently upright to insure his being plainly seen in the shaft of light that cut across the dark night from the doorway.

Clem had taken no more than a half-dozen steps along the path of the radiance, though, when it suddenly winked out. The powdersmoke barrage, intended as it was to mow down men, had not struck at first up near the lamp that hung from a rafter of the shack; but now a bullet had evidently caught it.

A curse crossed Clem's lips at this; for it was a clear, starry night, with not a wisp of cloud in the sky, and on such a night, Clem knew, the dark was so solid that a man could not see his hand in front of his face. He could never draw off the attackers now if they had not seen him break from the shack—

A grim smile bit off the imprecation a split-second later as Clem felt the brush of a bullet along his cheek. And as he groped forward in the solid blackness, the sound of sudden hoofs came to his ears, and the crackle of gunfire subsided abruptly to a few scattered shots.

As Clem neared the mesquite concentration among which he'd ground-tied his horse, he ran in a near crawl, in an effort to find the silhouette of his animal's head against the horizon. Kicking into the brush, he quickly circled to put the glow of the town behind where he figured the horse should be.

He didn't swing aboard the palomino a moment too soon. He had barely found the saddle with his hand when the riders were crashing through the brush all around him. One of them smashed past within feet of him. A voice that he didn't recognize came clearly, "We ain't never goin' tuh locate the son in this—*here he is!*"

The town glow that had helped Clem find his mount, he saw, had now silhouetted him momentarily for the speaker, and Clem whirled fast and headed straight down the slope here. It was a tricky game he had to play now, using the radiance of the town and the blackness of the night in just the right proportions. He must not let the riders find him—nor must he let them lose him. Far down this long gentle incline, almost at its foot, the town was clustered; off to the right Clem could hear the dull thud of more approaching hoofs, coming from the direction of the shack. The gunfire had completely ceased now, and Clem judged these new riders must likely be all those who had not originally gone after him.

Taking the confusion of hoofbeats above him and the shouted orders and queries being flung back and forth between the two groups of men, as proof that they had lost him again, Clem suddenly palmed his gun, blazed away three times in the general direction of the convening riders, heard an immediate response: *"That's him!"*

Then he waited, as his pursuers spilled down the slope, firing as they came. And when he felt that they had approached near enough to again detect his silhouette, he made sure that they saw him by triggering another bullet at them, and then spurred hard down the slope again.

And it was in this way that Clem sustained the chase for the next hour, in and out of the low hills and the timber stands to the north of Presby, blasting another bullet at the sound of hoofbeats behind him when they seemed to be falling too far behind, spurring his fast palomino and running away again when the riders' gunflame seemed to be winking too close. Once a bullet creased Clem's head, and he thought: *They would grab at the little bit of hair I've got left.*

AS he finally stepped down at his house, though, the incredible violence of the thing came wholly clear to him for the first time. He put a finger to the sticky welt on the side of his head and frowned. How in the devil could Alton Morgan hope to get away with cold-blooded slaughter? And how had he induced so many men to go in on it with him? Morgan was a power on Presby, and he'd turned many ranchers against Clem in the past year—but these men weren't killers, and the sheriff was still voted for in a pretty straight election, and he functioned with reasonable efficiency.

And the court seemed to favor Morgan too much of the time, but it did still pretend to uphold peace and justice and law and order. Certainly the people and the law enforcement officers of Presby would not calmly countenance *mass murder!* . . .

Clem went into the house and he got his answer there.

Billy said: "Just because you ducked Morgan tonight, don't think you've shaken him. He'll be back."

Ed rubbed the elbow of his left arm rapidly with his right hand.

"I'll say he'll be back."

Clem took a chair and he felt his legs tremble a little and he sat down at the kitchen table. There were two mugs of coffee on the table, in front of Billy and in front of Ed. Ed scraped his chair back from the table jerkily, looking at Clem's face as though secretly, as though in spite of himself. Billy kept his forefinger locked in the handle of his cup, and he moved the cup in a slow circular motion on the table as he glared at Clem. His big brown eyes scanned Clem's mussed shirt, from which a button had been torn out of the cloth, raised briefly to the streak of dried blood at the side of Clem's head, saw the dust-emphasized weariness-deepened lines of his face.

"Or *did* Morgan finally catch up with you," Billy said, playing his eyes over the torn shirt and the blood again significantly. "You aren't acting so perky any more," Billy drilled on. "Where is that famous sense of humor?" But Billy somehow seemed to be forcing the hard words out now, they didn't quite have the ring of conviction.

And then, evidently sensing not enough toughness in his tone, and seeing Clem glance at the coffee pot and start to push himself up, Billy snarled, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, I'll get you some coffee! You don't look like you'd make it to the stove," and slammed his chair to one side, whirling out of it.

Clem smiled, "Thanks, Billy." Then he frowned, "Look, lads, you're going to have to clear out of here."

"Oh no we're not," Billy supplied.

"I'm dead serious, Billy. Morgan has really gone loco about this thing. He evidently had considerably more boiling in him than I ever guessed. I'm telling you, you've got to—" And then his brothers' words recorded on his brain for the first time. "What do you mean," he said softly, " 'he'll be back'? Do you mean Morgan was here tonight?"

"Was he *here?*" Billy guffawed with a glance at Ed, as he poured steaming coffee into the cup he'd set in front of Clem. "Oh he was here, all right, him and only a couple dozen other cattlemen and cow-nurses. Just since sundown they were here, is all. Just from sundown until about a half hour ago, that's all. Camped on the doorstep. Draped on our corral fences. Building five thousand quirleys and sowing our front yard with the butts!"

CLEM forgot that this palomino had had a sight of trail-pounding for one evening. He forgot that his own frame was thoroughly saddle-jolted. He went out and the next he knew he was moving out the back road to the caves.

It was somewhat over two miles there, and he was about halfway when he saw the rider come out of the boulder clump ahead. He turned the head of his horse sharply to a stop. He tried his gun for freedom in its holster, and he remembered that it had two bullets in it and that his cartridge belt was empty.

The rider came toward him slowly. And the rider's mount and his own horse were almost flank to flank before recognition was possible.

"Clem Forrest!" Kitty Morgan whispered.

Clem had never really thought seriously about marriage—except once. One night, it must have been at least a year ago, he had taken Kitty Morgan home from a dance. She had gone to the dance with Barry Reed, her father's foreman. Reed had made one of those cracks that Clem never let pass, and Clem's big right hand had ended Reed's interest in dancing for that evening. Two of Reed's riders were pushing Reed's head in a water barrel when Clem rode off with Kitty.

Kitty had not been particularly pleased with Clem's actions. She had not been particularly interested in Clem's taking her home. They had not said much on the ride. Once she had looked at him in a quizzical way; her eyes had played briefly over the details of his face. And once Clem had looked at the moonlight in Kitty's soft hair and had thought he would like to kiss her, and looking into her quiet wide eyes when she said good-night without smiling, he had had a queer feeling that he realized later was linked somehow with the thought that someday he was mebbeso going to want to settle down and get married.

Clem put his gun back in his holster. He said, after he cleared his throat: "What in the devil are you doing out here at this time of night?"

Her horse half-whirled suddenly, its rump bumped Clem's leg.

She began: "Did father—"

Clem said: "No he didn't catch up with me." He searched her face, and her eyes were that wide way and they shone in the darkness, like that other night.

And before he could repeat his question, she said: "I am just riding. I've been riding all evening."

And then abruptly, as though this explanation completely satisfied him, he said: "Look. Does your father have any other reason that you know of—other, that is, than simply wanting to get rid of me because I've crossed him—for wanting to railroad me and my Chinese friends off this range?"

Kitty Morgan gave a bitter little laugh.

"Oh no," she said, "he has no other reason. Plain irritation is sufficient reason for my father to go to the wildest end to remove its source.

"Irritation, in fact," she added, as though half to herself, "has seemed ever since Mother died to have become the main motive for everything father does. While I grew up into a rich man's useless, spoiled only child—"

"But he wouldn't resort to colddeck murder, would he. He's not a killer. . . . Look—early this evening I went to the hovel outside the town where my friends have been existing, I took them some food—" and he told Kitty Morgan all that happened from then until now.

Kitty Morgan's face was stiff and pale when Clem had finished his account. He could sense that, by the light that her eyes caught and by her voice a moment later.

She husked, "No, father would not have done that—"

"Haven't you heard him say anything, any least thing, that could throw some light on this tonight?"

Kitty shook her head.

"Nothing. He's been raving against you of course ever since that first speech you made, that kept him from controlling the big waterhole below Presby.

"And he's been raving against the Chinamen ever since—I guess ever since you took up their—their cause. But I'm sure that was simply a further expression of his hatred of you.

"But who in heaven's name could have—"

"Look," Clem interrupted, "I have to go see if my friends made it out of that mess—and then I'll have to go talk to your father."

He paused a moment, gigged his horse's head around. "Do you think you can get back to your place all right—or—"

"But you can't go see him, the mood he's in now," she said haltingly. "He probably wouldn't be at home anyway. He'll probably be riding the range all night looking for you. You must at least wait until he calms down, because he always does finally—"

"No, this can't wait. I'm very sure of that. There's something very damned queer about what has happened tonight, and more than that, there's something very damned dangerous about it."

Kitty Morgan's wide eyes rested on Clem's face for a long moment. Then she said: "Do you mind if I ride with you?"

And wondering at her look, and wondering a moment later at the odd matter-of-fact quality of her question and his reply, Clem said: "No, I don't mind."

BAILEY FOWLER kept hefting his gun in his hand. It would have been a casual enough looking gesture if the twisted way his lips were pulled in were not taken into account. One of the men was handing oil-shiny .30-30's to another one, and the thud of them being bunked into their wooden rack was the only sound.

Slit Marion, the kid henchman who had spawned the plan, gritted, "We should of put the torch to the place, like I said, so we could of stopped any of 'em by the light of it that tried to hightail."

"Sure, an' brought out every man-jack for twenty miles around when them flames hit the sky," a burly black-faced hardcase spat.

The long-plank table stood in the center of this large room that had been cut into the side of a hill. A pot-belly stove was at the back dirt wall, and the pipe went up from it through the beamed-up split-log ceiling. Half the floor was hard-tramped clay, the rest was rough loose planking. Bailey Fowler's cot was at the wall on the planking side, next to the gun rack, the cots of the other sixteen men were ranged two deep along the opposite walls. The only illumination came from three thick candles stuck into the sea of tallow that overlaid one end of the table, and the fitful light from them played ominously over the grim set of Fowler's face now.

He gave no sign of listening to the talk of his men. Finally he raised his eyes without raising his head, transfixed Marion, who was seated across from him, transfixed the black-faced one, who was sprawled on the cots with the others.

"We figured to blot out Forrest and the Chinamen at a swipe," he began talking softly, "right? We figured to wait just long enough for the townspeople to find the corpses and get riled up at Morgan for the horrible slaughter—but not long enough to give the law a chance to take a hand, right? We figured to move in on Morgan on the wave of this righteous wrath and blast him into boot-hill. The law would call it range war, especially after they learned that justice had been done, and the citizens of Presby would see me as the logical successor to Morgan as boss of the town. Right?"

"Okay," Marion said, "but—"

"Okay but now the whole play has misfired because Forrest got away from us, eh?

"But *has* the play misfired. Look. Figure is the way Forrest is figuring it right now:—"

THE kid put an exhale of cigarette smoke to one side without taking his eyes off Fowler. And without taking his eyes of his boss he put the quirley butt between his lips and he plucked it out again very carefully with all his fingers, sucking another deep inhale. He was a tall slim youngster, and he must have known that he looked very much like Fowler, for he tended to pattern even his small gestures after Fowler's.

"—He knows he's the only one who got out of that lead storm alive, and he thinks it was Morgan that did it. All right. He shoots his way out of the fight and rides clear, and then he has to decide what to do next. Will he hit into the town and rouse up the people and tell them what Morgan did and try to get them or the law on his side? Not this Clem Forrest. There's a lone wolf if I ever saw one.

"He'll head for home, that's what he'll do. He'll grease his holsters and wait for sun-up, when he'd ride to Morgan's place and call a man-to-man showdown with sixguns."

"So," Marion said in the same very soft tone that Fowler always used, "what does that—"

"What does that mean to us? It means we know where we can find Forrest. It means we can still bullet-blast him and go on with our original plan from there."

The kid's face split with a grin.

"Yeah, that's right, ain't it."

"Sure, but what about the brothers?" the black-faced gunman said. "They'll be home too."

"They ain't backin' 'im in this Chink business," another one said. "We seen 'em walk out on 'im along with half the

town when he made that speech in front of the courthouse."

"If the brothers are at home," Bailey Fowler addressed the black-faced gunman first and then the others and finally the kid, "we'll give them a bellyful of lead too." He smiled mildly at Slit Marion. "We can't have any witnesses, after all." The half-spin motion of his putting his gun into its holster was silent and almost invisible, and his voice was almost inaudible when he said, "Let's go."

BILLY said, "Do you think maybe he has gone a little screwy or something?"

He jabbed his pillow into a higher pile against the wall his bunk came out from and tried lying flat on his back with his head propped up that way. None of the positions he tried seemed to induce sleep.

Ed said: "Gosh, you almost begin to think so, don't you." Ed's four-poster creaked loudly as he shifted his position again. "Gosh, this bed gets noisier—and noisier—" he grunted as he turned over on his left side.

"One thing is certain, he sure is dead serious about this thing."

"You give him the cup of coffee, and Lord knows he looked like he could use it, and we tell him that Morgan was here and instead of drinking the java he gets up like he was walking in his sleep or something and says 'I think I'd better return Mr. Morgan's call, and pronto,' and rides out again."

Billy gazed straight up wide awake into the pitch dark. Ed gazed wide awake out the window, the square opening of which was beginning to be visible against the lightening sky.

"Maybe," Billy said then, "a guy always looks kind of loco to other people when he really gets serious about something. Heaven knows Clem is right about the Chinamen after all. It's just that—"

"Oh sure he's right. But golly, a guy can't go around trying to solve all the world's troubles single-handed. He just gets himself a lot of grief, and that doesn't do anybody any good—"

"That's it. And if we'd ever given Clem any encouragement in these ideas he gets, we'd undoubtedly all three have been dead or at least exiled long since."

"Gosh yes."

Billy was silent after that. Ed's bed gave a creak. Then Billy said quietly: "Morgan was sure a silly looking sight though, wasn't he."

"And the other lunks! I swear I don't believe they knew what they'd come along with Morgan for. Did you notice how hardly any of them said a word? And Morgan acted as if he had to keep reminding himself what he was mad about, and then he'd get stomping up and down again and glaring off at the hills like he wanted to bite them.

"But I wonder what Clem thought was so amazing about Morgan coming here after him? And why did finding that out make him—"

The sounds of the hoofs was gently on the air then, so that Ed wasn't sure of it at first, until Billy said,

"Don't tell me they're coming back here now."

Ed's bed gave a loud creak as he sat up to peer out the window better.

"We're getting a lot of sleep tonight," he said.

Billy suddenly kicked out of bed, started pulling on his boots.

"All I know," he said tight-lipped, "is that I'm getting just a shade sick of this." He stood up and pulled his shirt over his head. "And I plan to advise Mr. Morgan of that fact."

Billy could see the dim shapes of men stepping down from horses in the yard as he passed the kitchen window moving through to the front door. He grabbed his gunbelts from a wallhook and he paused in front of the door before opening it to complete buckling the weapons into place.

It was not Alton Morgan this time that was on the other side of the door when Billy Forrest yanked it open however. Billy glanced at the fellow, who was standing with thumbs hooked in gunbelts, and then he glared past him to the other men in the yard.

"Where the devil are you, Morgan!" Billy yelled, the cords glistening thick on his neck. "Wherever you are, I'm warning you to take your mob and high-tail out of here pronto or I'm going to start throwing a little lead and I don't mean a little!" And Billy's hands were flicking exaggeratedly back of his .45's.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," Billy heard the insinuating voice of the man in front of him intone then. "Jest leave the cutters in the leather."

"Look, friend," a gentle explanation came from a man who had not dismounted, "we're looking for your brother. We're looking for Clem Forrest. Now would you want to just go tell him somebody is here to see him?"

FOU SUN grinned politely. It was difficult in the blackness to see the expressions of the others but somehow you could see Fou Sun's pleasant smile, as though the beam of a secret light touched it. It was thus that Clem, meantime, had found Fou Sun and the others at the cave.

"At least, thank heaven, you got here safely," Clem had said.

And Fou Sun had said at once: "And it is very fine, Clem, that you eluded your pursuers without suffering harm."

Then Clem saw the cloth bound around the upper arm of Lee, the eldest of them, and he knew it was a bandage and that the wide dark splotch was blood.

"You were hit, Lee—"

They were all standing awkwardly in front of the cave mouth, except Lee, who squatted on the ground. Clem had dismounted and he'd seen the bandage at once. Kitty had dismounted behind him.

"It is nothing," Fou Sun assured.

"Nothing," Lee grinned at Clem, then held up the arm and looked at it and then back at Clem as though to say, "See? Arm work fine and dandy."

Fou Sun said: "Lee was hit during the attack and in the excitement he did not know that he had been hit."

Kitty said suddenly: "Couldn't I put a clean bandage on the wound? My blouse is white cotton, and I could tear strips from it—"

Clem saw that Kitty had crouched beside Lee. Lee grinned at her in embarrassment, said: "Nothing."

Clem said without taking his eyes off the bandage: "This is Lee, Kitty Morgan. And this is Fou Sun and Wu Fang and Ah Lo."

The Chinamen all nodded and smiled eagerly, asking no questions, not even with their eyes. Kitty said, "Hello." She was ripping a tail of her blouse. She said: "Will you hold matches, Clem?"

Clem looked at Kitty. He watched her hands working and he saw that their motion was sure and capable but that they trembled a little. He hunkered down beside her without saying anything, cupped a good flame.

She said: "It has clotted, Lee, and it should not heal up around the soaked cloth you have on it now."

As she worked, Lee grinned happily at her. Clem kept his narrowed eyes focussed on the business of keeping a fresh match always alight. Once he raised his eyes to Kitty's face and let them rest there for a moment. Once she felt his gaze and their eyes met briefly, and Clem wondered if he was wrong in thinking that he had seen the beginning of a smile.

For it might have been the beginning of the wide smile she bestowed on Lee a moment later. She said: "There. You'll be more comfortable now at least."

Clem broke the remnant of the last match, jabbed it into the sand.

He said: "Our war with Presby range has taken a strange turn, Fou Sun." He told them what he meant by this. Fou Sun frowned at the end of Clem's account, searched Clem's face. Clem finished grimly, "So who, becomes the question now, laid down that barrage at the shack, and who chased me. And more important, why. I'm very sure now that wasn't part of Alton Morgan's play."

Fou Sun said slowly: "Do you not think it might not still be best that we move on to another range, Clem? Perhaps on another range there will be a

great shortage of hands, and then the distinction between white men and yellow men might not be weighed so severely—"

Clem shook his head.

"There's no other range, Fou Sun. There's only one range, and this is it. I thought we had agreed on that. And you said you weren't afraid."

"No, Clem, we are not afraid. But we are only four very unimportant men. Can our humble welfare be worth all this turmoil? And furthermore, if you will forgive me Clem—" Fou Sun made an apologetic gesture with one hand to insure his words not sounding harsh "—I do not believe I have understood from the beginning in what manner we can fight this—this battle. And even less have I understood how, simply by refusing to be frightened by these men who would banish us, we can cause them to alter their decision about us and accept us."

*No, it was true, he had had no plan in this thing. He'd never, for that matter, had a plan when he decided to do something about one man pushing another man around. He acted instinctively, and all he was ever sure of was that his instinct was right, and that he must obey it come hell or high water. . . .*

Clem narrowed his eyes. "No, Fou Sun," he said, "we have no plan. We don't know where we're going. But this is the thing: if every man stopped and planned and weighed what good his action would do before he struck at evil when he saw it, I don't think much would ever have been done about evil.

"What we've got, Fou Sun, is a sort of master plan. It's a very simple master plan. This is it: *when we see evil, we fight it.* And, to my mind, lad, there's no greater evil than a man figuring he can push another man around simply because his own skin happens to be a couple shades paler than the other man's."

Fou Sun's frown faded. A smile spread far back into his cheeks.

Fou Sun said: "It is a very good plan, Clem."

Clem swung aboard his horse. He said:

THEY'D topped the rise above Alton Morgan's place when the first bullet came. Clem felt his heart tighten in his chest when he sensed the breath of the slug and then saw the chip of rock skitter down the side of the boulder.

Clem grabbed the reins of Kitty's horse as he whirled his own and got them between the row of slab-like boulders that flanked the trail on the left. And then the boulders came alive with splitting rock dust as the lead began to come.

Kitty said in a tight voice: "It's the same ones as before, isn't it—"

"Yes."

The edge of the sky was pearly with dawn now, and Clem was sure the light was sufficient for them to be seen clearly at some distance. The delay in the sound of the first shot had convinced him too that this shooting was originating with rifles not near at hand.

But the gun that suddenly blazed beside a big rock not than ten feet away repudiated this estimate.

Another gun blazed from behind a rock that was lined up with their boulder alley fort. Clem raised his gun to fire at the jutting stetson, chose to save his last slug, whirled to Kitty.

"Look, we're rats in a trap here. We'll have to ride for it."

And then, feeling the alive warmth of Kitty close to him as whirling he jammed their horses together, seeing the fearlessness in the deep quiet blue of her eyes, knowing that now he must send her out to almost certain death, and remembering his Chinese friends who were waiting helplessly in the implicit trust that what he was doing was right and who would be lost now when a bullet found him—in that moment Clem knew a surge of panic at the thought of what he was doing, of the violent hand he had presumed to take in the lives of others. For a fleeting moment Clem knew the wish that he could undo all he had started here. *Would it be better if you hadn't done it? Would you really duck it if you were back at the beginning again? Was that just a pretty speech you made to Fou Sun—or did that come from the*

*heart, from the guts—*

"Our only chance is to split up, you heading for your place out that end—" Clem began, and anticipating this, Kitty was already rearing her horse in a turn.

Clem picked off the man atop the boulder with his last bullet, as the man half-straightened to aim at Kitty. Clem slammed his empty gun at one who was coming .45 in hand up the slope toward the opening Clem was going out.

A bullet that only a close-up rifle could have expelled kicked him half out of the saddle before he was fifty feet down the slope, however. A second bullet jerked the leather under him, and he waited for his horse to falter. But the animal held its steady drive down the slope, and, hugging its flank in the position the bullet had sent him to, feeling only the burn high on his left shoulder where he reckoned the bullet had punched clear through, Clem muttered three minutes later: *They must be one hell of a lot of bad shots, or I must be one hell of a lucky guy.*

*But was Kitty equally lucky*—He came up into the saddle to scan the yard. He saw no sign of Kitty or her horse. He reined in, surveyed the slope up to the boulders they'd just left. He saw men grouping on horseback up there, could see light flickering off the flat metal of the rifles in their hands. *But no sign of Kitty—*

He wheeled, spurred around the main house hoping she might have kept on to the rear of it. Alton Morgan, not Kitty, was back there. He was about to mount his horse at the back porch. And seeing Clem, he let go of the horse as if it were red hot and tore the gun out of his right hand holster.

"I've got no gun," Clem told him. Clem stepped down, letting the horse trot on. "Look—" he began talking in earnest, but Morgan's eyes and lips had tightened fiercely and he was keeping the big .45 hard on Clem's belly.

"You look," Morgan gritted. "You look." He flicked a glance up the slope that Clem had just come down. "So you and your killer crew hid out in the hills until you could catch me alone, eh?"

"Look, Morgan, you're going to have to forget your feud with me and we're going to have to fight side by side. A really serious threat is menacing this range, and you and I—"

"Had one of your sidewinders tail us until you saw us split up, waited long enough to give the other boys plenty of time to make it back to their places—and now you come out of your holes like the rats you are and—"

Clem hadn't been listening to most of this. His lips had thinned almost imperceptibly, his eyes had gone vague, for you used your field vision, your "field instinct" for what Clem knew he had to do now. And when he had every nerve and muscle aligned for it, his right hand was suddenly clamped like steel on Morgan's gun-wrist and the weapon was blazing harmlessly into the dirt and Clem's left forearm was coming up like an express train under Morgan's chin and jarring the man's brains loose.

Clem took the gun from Morgan's fingers then as though Morgan didn't want it any longer. And as Morgan staggered back dazed, his gun-belt popped off of him and tumbled into the dust.

"Neat," Gary Morgan said. "I used to have a jaw-buster somethin' like that m'self."

"Look, old man," Clem said, hurdling the porch rail, "I don't know who's in this horde coming off the hill and I don't know what they want—all I know very surely is that they're gun-loose and hell-bent, and you and I and anybody else around here have got to gang up and stop them."

"You an' me'll be it, then, son, because good old Alton's sent every one of his hands out ridin' line." Gary gave his scraggly white head a good scratching following Clem into the house. "Allus did my best fightin' when I warn't too crowded anyhow. Hand me down one o' them car-bines there in that there cubby-hole off the kitchen, son."

"YOU don't recognize any of them, old man? They're all strangers to you?" Clem said softly. He narrowed his

eyes, lay his .30-30 across the window.

"Ain't never laid eyes on none of them buskies," he said. He levered the .30-30 he had in the adjoining window. "They're droppin' off," he added.

Clem narrowed his eyes, locked a long thumb over the smooth metal above the trigger cove, as he saw the riders letting their horses run free as they ducked for the cover of outbuildings and fences. *They weren't men in with Morgan, they weren't local ranchers, they weren't men he himself had ever had dealings with—then who, who in the devil. . . .*

A bullet showered glass on Clem's head as it took out the pane of the window he'd raised. Clem chose one of the attackers and drew a bead on the fellow. His breath clouded the metal briefly next his mouth as he said to Gary, "Let them have it, old man."

THE fight came to Clem in pictures after that, in crazy, violently presented tableaus.

There was the moment when a bullet must have creased the barrel of old Gary's gun, and the force of it set the graybeard, very surprised, back on his rear on the floor. "Why, th' gol durned ornery—!" was all Clem heard of Gary's purple comment.

There was the only time when Clem was sure he or Gary had scored a direct hit, when two of the attackers, evidently on the hunch that maybe all that was needed here was a couple of good men with guns to go in and end the scrap, came out into the clear brandishing two big Colts each, headed fast for the front opening in the fence that ringed the house, and stopped dead in their tracks there and straightened and half looked around as though they had both remembered at the same moment that they had forgotten something—stopped dead in their tracks, before they dropped literally dead in the dust, dispatched by simultaneous, parallel bullets from Clem's and Gary's rifles.

And there was when Alton Morgan staggered into the room behind them and Clem was saved the trouble of deciding what to do about him by two enemy bullets. For, as Morgan stood wavering there glaring at Clem's broad shoulders, one bullet splashed the pieces of a crock that had been on the table in front of him, into his face, and when he dazedly put an arm up to protect his eyes, as though they were the only part of him endangered, another bullet hit him in the lifted wrist and shoved him back into a chair at the wall behind him.

And there was now, when, after what seemed like hours during which not a single slug tried the house, Clem reckoned that the leader of the attackers had called at last for wipe-out. Clem lowered his gun, winced at the hard pain in his stiffening shoulder. "We're going to be busy from here on out, old man," he said. His gaze swept the action beyond the fence. Staying without accurate reach of whatever guns might stud the windows of the house, the attackers were spreading right and left, obviously to surround the house.

Clem raced to the rear of the house palming the .45 he'd taken from Alton Morgan. He went from window to window, aiming to descry the first men to come on, should they be stupid enough to throw assault unevenly.

A moment later Clem discovered that they had indeed come on unevenly. But not from stupidity, not at all from that.

Clem returned to the big front room, but he did not bring up the six-gun in his right hand. Four black muzzles, held low, whipsawed him. Two of them were in the hands of Slit Marion, who stood at the right of the doorway, and two were in the hands of Bailey Fowler, who waited, feet set apart, at the left.

"Drop the weapon, Forrest," Fowler said. "Drop it fast, Forrest."

BEHIND them, one of Fowler's crew covered old Gary with a .45 while with his free hand he yanked the carbine out of the graybeard's fingers. When Gary gave the rifle a sudden twist just before he released it, that was evidently meant to bring the wood of it up under

the gunster's jaw, the latter clubbed Gary to the floor with his muzzle.

The focus came into Fowler's eyes again; their gaze had not left Clem's face, but their attention had. And the smile became pleasant again.

"It's all very puzzling, isn't it, friend." He flicked a condescending look at Morgan. "Our former range king seems to be a bit baffled too." The smile went. The eyes went cold, unreachable. "Well, gentlemen, you won't have to puzzle long." He tipped the nose of his gun up a fraction, so that it lined on the lower part of Clem's stomach. "You take Morgan, Slit, I'll take this one—"

THE thing that happened next roused what was perhaps a psychic reaction in Clem, but what really wasn't at all of that nature when Clem's long conditioning was considered. After all, Clem had been for a good many years seeing targets intact one moment, and the next moment gone completely as though removed by an invisible, lightning-swift hand. He had, in fact, been witnessing such marvels of gun wizardry ever since his brother Billy had decided, because of wanting to make up for his pretty-boy look, to be very good with six-shooters in both hands.

So in a way it wasn't odd for the thought to flash through Clem's mind, when the black-muzzled .45 in Fowler's hand suddenly disappeared as though by magic from his hand: *It's Billy!*

Clem had been standing poised on the balls of his feet in the position, just inside the doorframe, in which sight of Fowler's and Marion's guns had hung him up. His eyes had gone to Fowler's face and they had caught there fascinated. They moved now for the first time, to the doorway at the far end of the room that led into a short hallway that joined this room and a side door of the house. It had been through here that Fowler and Marion had doubtless entered, approaching the house under cover of that wall without windows, and it was through here that Clem now saw Fou Sun coming with a six-gun leveled out in front of him in his right hand. Fou Sun would not have taken two steps into the hallway if the attention of Fowler's whole crew hadn't been drawn in that moment first to the thing that had happened to Fowler's gun and then to the direction from which the sound of the shot came. And Clem saw that Fou Sun's bold entry would still be ended by a storm of lead if Fowler's gunslingers were not kept distracted.

Clem's uppercut was his forte. The forte of it was how he could start it from wherever his hand chanced to be and always bring it off pretty terribly. Marion's chin had turned and gone down as he observed the mystery of Fowler's empty right hand. Marion's chin came up much faster than it went down and it turned back at a crazy angle with Clem's terrible right fist lifting under it.

Clem saw two or three things memorable things then, before the whole place exploded in his face and dissipated him into oblivion.

He saw one of Fowler's henchmen—a sere-faced giant who, having spotted Fou Sun, was yanking savagely at both his big weapons—die on his feet in that magic silent way that Clem knew had to be of another bullet from Billy's gun.

He saw most of Fowler's men turn their guns on him, at sight of him dropping Marion; and he saw Fou Sun trigger his .45 at them point blank; and he saw Billy and Ed and Wu Fang and Ah Lo and even Lee with his arm bound up, all coming into the house behind blazing or clubbed guns.

He saw Alton Morgan start for Bailey Fowler with bare hands, and Fowler calmly turn the gun on him that he'd taken from his left hand holster. He saw the wink of terror in Morgan's eyes as Morgan realized that he was looking squarely at Death, and the disbelieving look in Morgan's eyes as Morgan witnessed Fou Sun kicking Fowler's gun up in the nick of time, then taking the bullet that was meant for Morgan in his own chest, as Fowler immediately recovered.

And finally, Clem saw Morgan ignore Fowler's weapon to leap suddenly to Fou

Sun's side and lift him from the jagged shards of the broken jug Fou had fallen back on—a foolish act, of course, in the midst of this murder maelstrom, though Clem found himself blind to that practical angle of it. . . .

Bailey Fowler didn't shoot Alton Morgan in his broad back as he crouched there because Clem put all he had into the right hand he loosed at Fowler's head.

And right then was when the storm of powdersmoke and flame that rent the room enveloped Clem. As though one of the acrid blossoms of orange flame and smoke that had been exploding everywhere had finally burst in his brain. . . .

AFTER they'd finished up at Alton Morgan's late that afternoon, the coroner and the men that had come out with the sheriff went back to town, while the lawman rode on to the Forrests' place. The medico's office was next to the jail, so they'd taken Fowler and his crew into Presby, placing the dead ones—Fowler and Marion were among these—in the morgue, the wounded ones in the beds in the sawbones' back room, and the ones that had whole hides—there were three—in the jail.

Kitty's face looked tired when she came down off the Forrest veranda to meet the sheriff, but there was a calm, a strength, a glow of happiness about it that even the sheriff noted as he stepped down, and he was not a perceptive man.

The sheriff got the details from Kitty. The medico had told her to keep all callers away for a few days, even the law, and she had been able, she said, to talk to the men enough to have a pretty complete story. The sheriff wrote it all down, reviewing finally the matters he was uncertain whether he had straight.

"You went for Ed and Billy Forrest, and they got guns and horses, and then you went and got the Chi—"

"Fou Sun and Wu Fang and Ah Lo and Lee," Kitty said softly.

"Eh?" the sheriff looked up, saw the serious unwavering look in Kitty's eyes, felt himself flush as he said quickly, "Oh sure, sure!" And crossing out "Chinamen" in his report, he said as he wrote in the names: "Fou Sun—and—"

"Wu Fang."

"—Wu Fang—and—"

"—Ah Lo—and Lee." The tip of his tongue, that came out as he wrote, went back in. "And then you all rode hard to your Dad's place. Okay. That oughta give me all I need for the time bein'."

He stuffed the notebook into a hip pocket, frowned amiably at Kitty.

"How was you able to duck them two sidewinders who was after you all that way, young lady—when you went for Ed and Billy?"

Kitty ran long fingers back through her disheveled dark-shiny hair.

"I guess God must have been watching over me," she murmured. "He seems to take quite a firm hand in things."

The sheriff shook his head in amiable admiration. His gaze wandered to the house as he pulled his palomino toward him by the reins.

"Folks're going to be mighty grateful for what them lads did. They stopped one devil of a wolf pack. No tellin' what would of happened to all of us iffen them sons had moved in."

He swung aboard his horse.

"Only one's hurt bad you say is Clem, eh. They bad-creased his scalp, eh."

Kitty smiled for the first time, a gentle, almost beatific smile.

"He'll be all right," she said, "I'll see to that."

The sheriff looked askance at that smile, for it puzzled him too. He took off his hat and scratched his head. One thing he was certain of: there were some angles to this affair that must be too deep for him. He looked toward the house again and his puzzlement only grew. It screwed up his face.

"An' you say," he muttered, more to himself now than to Kitty, "that they're all lyin' in beds in there in a row, eh. Clem Forrest lyin' on one side of Alton Morgan, an'—an' Fou Sun an' them others on the other. An' Anton fully conscious, you say, an' not demandin' to be carted out of there. . . . "

# BULLET BLIZZARD

**SURE, THE TWO KILLERS WERE LIKELY STILL IN TOWN FOR THE LAW TO APPREHEND — BUT SO WERE THEIR DEADLY .45'S!**

**By GEORGE KILRAIN**

"Don't!" Ed shouted as the gunman cracked down!

STANDING by the bank window, Ed Malloy could see the huge drifts piling up in the street outside. The snow was already a foot deep with a roaring wind driving it against the iron-barred windows of the Cattleman's National Bank, piling it three and four feet high in the alleys.

Cashier Fred Baldwin, middle-aged, almost bald, came over and stood beside the teller. Baldwin said casually,

"If it keeps up this way for two hours, you won't be able to see Little Creek in the morning. The snow will be so deep."

Malloy nodded. He was tall, slender, dark-haired with quiet brown eyes. Standing beside the window he could see the two men urging jaded horses through the drifts. Their faces were covered with heavy mufflers; their oilskin slickers caked with ice. They rode as though numb with cold, and they pulled up their mounts in front of the bank.

"Danged fools," Baldwin grunted. "These cattlemen will go through hell or high water to get their deposits to

the bank. You'd think we paid a ten percent interest rate."

Ed Malloy walked back to the cage. He flicked a speck of dust from the spotless black frock suit and waited for the customers to come in. He could see them through the glass door, slapping gloved hands together to restore the circulation.

Fred Baldwin went back to his desk and sat down. Both men looked at the clock ticking on the wall. It was the only sound in the building—the only sound in Little Creek as the snow storm enveloped it in a white blanket.

"We lock up in half an hour," Baldwin said from the desk.

The teller looked at him. Baldwin was a family man and his children would be waiting for him. In the absence of bank president Tom McCall, Baldwin was in full charge of the little bank. He had liked the responsibility.

The two men came through the door, head down, the water dripping from them. Ed Malloy waited calmly. He'd be glad too when the doors were closed. It had been a long, wearisome day. The snow had kept most of the cattlemen out on their ranches. Even the men in town weren't stirring out of the houses if they could help it.

Ed saw the flash of metal beneath the slicker of the taller of the two men. Instinctively, his hand dropped toward the drawer in which he kept the loaded forty-five. There hadn't been a bank robbery in the Cattleman's National since he'd been behind the cage and he'd had the job two years.

His hand stopped as he saw the gun swing clear of the slicker. He looked into the dark muzzle. The two men still held their mufflers tight around their faces. Water dripped from the battered sombreros and fell to the floor.

"Reckon you better git them hands up," the tall man said. "It ain't healthy."

Ed Malloy blinked. He looked across at Fred Baldwin rising slowly to his feet. He saw the fear in the older man's eyes. He knew what it would mean to the cashier if the bank were robbed now. They had over fifteen thousand dollars in cash in the safe. An hour ago, the kindly Baldwin had sent Jeff Galloway home because the weather was so bad. Galloway, the veteran deputy, had been assigned by the bank president as permanent guard.

"Reckon you better get back to your own place, Jeff," Baldwin had grinned. "There's nothin' to worry about here."

Jeff Galloway's blue eyes had shown their appreciation. The deputy's child was sick and Jeff himself was hoarse from a cold.

The shorter of the two bandits strode quickly over to Baldwin's desk. The cashier's right hand had dipped down to a drawer in which Ed knew he carried his gun.

"Don't!" Ed shouted, but it was too late. The smaller robber had lifted his weapon and crashed it down on the cashier's bald head. Ed saw the blood as Baldwin slumped back in the chair.

The tall bandit had a small crescent scar at the edge of the left eye. He was up at the cage with the gun levelled at Ed Malloy's stomach.

"Git them hands up," the man rasped.

SLOWLY, the teller lifted his hands over his head. It was useless to attempt drawing a gun now. He realized he should have been more aware when the two came in. Men didn't usually ride into town in such weather to make deposits or secure loans.

The small man lifted the counter door and walked over to the safe in the corner. Ed Malloy watched grimly. Just a few minutes before, Fred Baldwin had opened the safe to extract some papers. He was quite sure the cashier had not closed it. That was something else against the kindly Baldwin.

"If it ain't unlocked," the tall bandit grinned through the muffler, "you'd better show us how, hombre."

Ed stared at him. He glanced at Baldwin hunched in the chair, blood flowing freely from the head wound. The two owlhooters didn't even look at the injured man. The teller let out his breath and the hardness came into his eyes.

He watched the small man yank on the handle and the safe door opened. He heard the muffled exclamation. The man in front of him shifted his eyes to look and Ed went into action.

There was no time to get the gun in the drawer but there was a possibility of putting one of the two men out of action and hopping over the counter to the left of the cage. Once on the other side of the counter and with the taller man's gun in his possession, he could do plenty of damage.

The bank teller's hand closed around a lead paper weight on the counter. With his eyes on the bandit, he lifted the heavy object and hurled it for the man's face. He had to throw through the opening in the cage and then drop to the floor to avoid a bullet.

He didn't know whether the missile struck. He was down on the floor and scrambling out of the cage. The short man at the safe whirled and poked a quick shot at him.

Ed Malloy heard the slug smash into the wood above his head. Leaping up, he vaulted the counter to the other side. As he came over, the tall man's gun slashed downward. Ed Malloy just had time to look up into the gleaming blue eyes before the explosion occurred inside his brain. He knew he'd missed with the paper weight, and the tall bandit had been waiting for him.

He was conscious of the clock ticking on the wall when he came to. It was the only sound he heard. He could see the clean painted ceiling above him and he felt the dull throb in his head.

Placing his hand to his forehead, it came away sticky with blood. He sat up and the throbbing was more intense. Outside, it was now dark and the wind was still blowing and driving snow against the glass door.

He noticed the position of the hands on the clock. He'd been unconscious nearly an hour.

Staggering to his feet, he made his way along the counter to Fred Baldwin's desk. He owed much to the older man. Baldwin had gotten him the job in the bank when he'd drifted into Little Creek, an unemployed school teacher without prospects, and hungry.

"I reckon we kin fix you up, son," Baldwin had said. He'd taken the younger man home and given him a room and supper. He'd met Fred Baldwin's family, and he'd met Sally Baldwin, the cashier's daughter.

LAST Sunday they had come to an agreement. There was a little house at the north end of town. It had been built recently and the occupants had moved east. It was empty and Ed made the suggestion.

"I think," the girl smiled, "father will like you as a son-in-law, Ed."

Ed Malloy stared at the unconscious man slumped in the chair. He knew there wasn't another man in the west he'd rather have as a father-in-law than Fred Baldwin.

As he brushed through the counter entrance, he saw the safe door was open. The two bandits had cleaned it out and left. The single shot fired had evidently attracted no attention in the roar of the storm. The bank walls were thick and there would be no passers-by.

From a water bucket, Ed Malloy soaked his handkerchief and washed the old man's head. Fred Baldwin groaned softly. The teller looked at the cut and then swore under his breath. Baldwin had lost plenty of blood and if left to himself, may have bled to death.

He washed the cashier's face with the cold water and he saw the eyelids flutter. Baldwin came to a moment later. He looked into Ed Malloy's eyes.

"They got it, Ed?" he asked.

The teller nodded. He listened to the roar of wind outside. He saw the expression on the older man's face. Tom McCall had left Baldwin in complete charge of the bank and the cashier had dismissed the deputy before his time was up. Baldwin was responsible for the robbery. Jeff Galloway was a handy man with a gun and he would have been waiting for the two when they came in.

Fred Baldwin tried to stand up. He

looked at the safe and then at Ed Malloy.

"I'll bring over Doc Stanton," Ed told him. "Then I'll get Jeff and Sheriff Edwards." He paused. "They may not have left town, Fred."

A light of hope flashed into the cashier's eyes and then was gone.

"The sheriff is over in Sand City," Baldwin mumbled, "and besides we don't even know what the two looked like."

"One of them had a scar on the left eye," Ed said quietly. "I think I'd recognize him again."

Fred Baldwin fumbled with some papers on the desk before him. Ed Malloy knew what this meant. McCall wouldn't take this easily. Big Tom would look around for another cashier; he'd have to protect himself with the citizens of Little Creek.

Ed Malloy slipped the gun from the drawer and stuck it into his belt. He buttoned the coat tightly and then reached for his great coat hanging on a nearby hook. He found a towel and daubed it in the bucket again. He made Baldwin hold the wet bandage to the cut. He washed his own face, which had been streaked with blood. Unlike Fred Baldwin, his cut had stopped bleeding of its own accord.

"Be right back, Fred," he said. The cashier was sitting at his desk staring into space. Baldwin was not a young man and the cashier's job had been a good one. It was the only thing the man could do in town.

"It ain't easy," Baldwin said, "bringin' up a family, Ed."

Ed Malloy looked at the man. "There's still a chance," he ventured. "Anybody tries to leave town in a storm like this is plain crazy."

Baldwin shook his head hopelessly.

Ed met Doc Stanton driving his way up the street into the face of the wind. He recognized the tall, thin man with the hunched shoulders and the beak of a nose.

STANTON motioned him to step inside the house and Ed followed. The doctor looked at him and shook his head.

"You won't be seeing Jeff Galloway for a few weeks, Ed," he said. "Just came from his house. He's got a fever."

Ed Malloy blew out his breath. Sheriff Edwards was out of town and Jeff Galloway was down sick.

"Step over to the bank," Ed told the doctor. "Fred Baldwin's in a little trouble." He related the incidents of the robbery. Stanton shook his head.

"It's bad for Fred," he said thoughtfully. "I know Tom McCall."

They went to the bank and Stanton bandaged the cashier's head.

"They may have left town," Ed Malloy said, "or they may be waiting for the storm to pass over. They know we didn't recognize them, and Little Creek is a fairly big town."

"What do you intend to do?" Stanton asked. "We could organize a posse and make a search."

Ed shook his head. "They'd skip at the first intimation that anyone was looking for them. No one knows the bank has been held up and we'll keep it quiet. If they're still in Little Creek I may be able to find them."

Fred Baldwin sat back in the chair. "They're gun hands, Ed," he objected. "You wouldn't stand a chance if they went to work on you. They'd get away anyhow."

"Once they were out of town," the doctor pointed out, "you'd never be able to locate them. You couldn't follow a man across the street in this storm. The snow covers footprints as soon as they're made."

Ed Malloy buttoned his coat. He looked out the window. It was already dark.

"I can look," he said quietly. "One man couldn't scare them away." Pulling open the door, he stepped out into the storm. He felt the wet flakes drive against his face. He was positive the two bank robbers were still in Little Creek. If they were wise enough to walk in on the bank during a terrific storm when they realized no one would be in the building, they'd have enough sense to remain where it was warm.

He slipped in the side door of the big

stable behind the Lincoln Hotel. If he could locate the two horses, he'd know where the men were. Stubby Peters, the hostler, looked at him curiously.

"Nobody's come in here since mornin'," Peters said. "Any trouble, Ed?"

Ed Malloy shrugged. "I'm looking for a few friends, Stubby," he told the short, red-faced man. "Don't know where they put up."

"Try the Atlas Corral," Peters advised. "A lot o' riders put up there."

The teller went out into the storm again. The Atlas Corral was at the other end of town and it was a long walk against the wind and the snow. He was panting when he stepped inside the stable.

There were no strangers in Little Creek since early morning. A lone rider had come in at ten o'clock, but he'd ridden out before the storm got too heavy.

Ed Malloy warmed his hands over a pot-belly stove in the office of George Staley, proprietor of the Corral.

"It's a devil of a time to be lookin' fer strangers," Staley grinned. "Go on home and eat your supper, Ed."

Malloy smiled quietly. He thought of Fred Baldwin waiting at the bank. Fifteen thousand dollars had been taken from the safe and the cashier was responsible.

"Friends o' yours, Ed?" Staley asked.

Ed Malloy shook his head. "I just know 'em, George," he explained grimly. He knew if he let the word out that the bank had been held up, Little Creek would be in a furore. Both robbers would be gone before he could locate them.

The bank teller stared at the top of the stove. He was still convinced that the two men were in town—possibly in a private barn or shed, and he couldn't go through all of them. It would have been foolish for them to lodge their mounts in a public livery stable. A sheriff searching for the two would look there for the horses first of all.

"Anybody rides in or outa this town today," Staley chuckled, "is plumb outa his head."

MALLOY went out into the street again and bucked the wind. There were three saloons in Little Creek, and men who had been riding in the storm would stop there first of all for a warm drink.

He went into the Brown Jug, the first place on the street. There were half a dozen men at the bar, and a card game in the corner. He recognized all the men. Living in Little Creek for two years, and working in the bank, he'd come to know the citizens and the cattlemen for miles around.

The Black Horse yielded no clues.

"Have a drink, Ed," bartender Ben Simpson yelled at him. "Thaw yore insides."

Malloy smiled and backed out again. There was still the Lariat Saloon run by Joe Timbs. The Lariat was the biggest place in Little Creek. Ed went in the side door. He stamped the snow from his boots and then walked up to the bar.

There were more men in the Lariat and there were tables at the other end. Three of the tables were filled. The teller saw the two slickers hanging on hooks near the last table. Four men were at the table and two had their backs toward him.

Ed Malloy stood at the corner of the bar. He kept his eyes on the table. He recognized two of the men—the two facing him. One was a cattleman, Matt Carewe; the other, the barber from across the street.

The two men with their backs to him, he didn't know. He caught a glimpse of a sallow face as one of them turned slightly. The other, a lean, rangy man with dark hair, turned to order a drink. Ed Malloy raised his hand to his face. He saw the scar over the left eye of the taller man; he saw the thin, acquiline nose and the slit of a mouth.

He was sure the tall man didn't recognize him. He went back to the ante-room again. His men were in the saloon. Their horses were hidden somewhere and the fifteen thousand dollars were probably in the same vicinity. Somehow, he had to get that money back.

To confront the men at the table would be suicide. They were evidently cold-blooded gunhands and they'd shoot him up and make a get-a-way. If he did capture them with the aid of the other citizens of Little Creek, he still didn't know where the money was. If he could find where they had the horses and the cash from the safe—

He went outside and around to the front door. Night had fallen but the snow was still driving through the streets. He felt it getting colder. He glanced up and down the street first and then yanked open the door.

"Fire!" he yelled at the top of his voice. He heard the commotion inside and then he plunged through the drifts in the road and stood in a doorway across from the Lariat Saloon.

Men were shouting inside the building as they struggled into great coats and oilskins. Two men plunged out of the door tugging at slickers. Ed Malloy smiled. He watched the two drive through the snow banks and cut around a corner at the end of the street.

Stepping from his place of concealment, he ran after them. Halfway up the next street, he saw them turn into a tumble-down barn which had formerly been the shop of a blacksmith. Ed Malloy knew of the place.

Men were tumbling into the street from the Lariat Saloon and searching for the fire. Ed Malloy heard them shouting around the corner. He slipped into an alley and waited till the two men came out of the barn.

They passed by within a few yards of him as he crouched against a wooden wall. He heard them grumbling. He waited till he was sure they were back in the saloon, then he walked swiftly to the barn and went inside.

The two horses were steaming in the stalls in one corner. Snow had drifted through an open window and formed a pile near the door. The two saddles were hanging from rusted hooks. There was a small loft with a broken down ladder leading up to it. A rusted lantern hung from another hook. There had been a little oil in the lantern and the wick was flickering faintly. Quite possibly, the two intended to return immediately. There wouldn't be much time.

Quickly, the teller made a search of the floor. There were no loose boards and he was sure the money hadn't been tucked beneath the floor. He went into all the corners. There was still the loft.

He felt the moisture on the rungs of the rickety ladder as he went up. He knew they'd been up in the loft. If so, it was possible the money was hidden there.

THE loft was very small and the floor covered with about a foot of hay. Ed Malloy kicked it around. He pawed in the corners and his hands grasped a leather bag.

Pulling it from the hay, he hurried back into the light. He saw the neat stacks of bills inside. Fred Baldwin would be glad to see them.

With the bag under his arm he started down the ladder. The barn door creaked and then closed. At the bottom rung, Ed turned around. He saw the short man standing inside the doorway, gun in hand, a grin on his wide face.

"Drop it, hombre," the gunman said softly.

The teller let the bag slip from his fingers. He stepped away and he felt the gun he'd tucked into his belt. In a straight fight he wouldn't stand a chance with the bull-necked, massive-jawed man before him.

"Up with the hands," the short man snapped.

Ed Malloy lifted his hands over his head. He backed up to the wall and waited.

"You'll never leave Little Creek tonight," he told the gunman.

"Reckon we ain't plannin' on leavin'," the short man grinned. "There'll be plenty o' time in the mornin'."

He was walking up toward the bag on the floor. Ed Malloy blinked. He was standing back in the shadows against the wall with his hands above his head. Reaching back to the wall he felt some-

thing cold. His fingers tightened around the object. It was a horseshoe hanging from a nail on the wall.

He was standing six feet away from the short man when the bandit picked up the bag.

The door creaked in the wind and the short man turned his head slightly. Ed Malloy's right hand whirled downward. The gunman didn't see the leaden missile flying through the air. It hit him a glancing blow on the side of the head and he went down with a groan.

Quickly, the teller stepped forward. He picked up the gun and tossed it into the hay loft.

He snatched the rope from the saddle hanging on the wall and quickly trussed up the gunman's hands and feet. The partner of the man he'd captured might be coming back any moment to see what had caused the delay. Ed surmised the short man had come back for more cash.

With the bag in his hand, he hurried out into the street again. Fred Baldwin would be glad to see this cash back in the bank safe. They might be able to hush up the whole thing so Tom McCall wouldn't know his bank had been robbed.

A gust of wind hit him as he rounded the corner. It nearly took away his breath. He staggered forward and then he bumped into another man running from the other direction.

Dazedly, Ed Malloy sat down in the snow, the bag still in his hand. He caught a glimpse of the man above him. He saw the thin face and the cruel mouth.

Scrambling to his feet, Ed Malloy plunged forward. He knew the bandit was reaching for his gun and he had to stop it. He felt the powder burn his face.

Something twitched past his ear and Ed Malloy realized how close to death he'd been. He caught the hand holding the gun and he pushed it back. The momentum of his rush carried both men backward. The tall bandit staggered out into the drifts, Ed Malloy with him.

AGAIN the gun roared but the slug went up into the air this time. They were struggling back toward the Lariat Saloon. Ed heard the noise inside.

The bank teller's right hand was free and he saw the bandit's face above him. He swung his fist and he felt the pain in his knuckles as it connected. The gunhand staggered back again.

Ripping the gun from the man's limp fingers, Ed stood up. He smiled at the crowd gathering around.

"Anybody got the key to the jail house?" he asked. "There's another one down in the old smith barn around the corner."

"What's the charge, Ed?" Joe Timms asked, dumfounded.

"Robbing the Cattleman's National Bank," Ed Malloy told them. He picked up the bag. Men came forward and yanked the tall gunman to his feet.

A few minutes later Ed Malloy walked into the bank. Fred Baldwin was still sitting in the chair by his desk. He stared at the bag under the teller's arm.

"You got it, Ed?" he asked eagerly.

Doctor Stanton was still there. Ed Malloy had been gone forty-five minutes. He dropped the bag on the desk.

"You can count it, Fred," he said.

The cashier stared at him. "Have trouble, Ed?" he asked.

"A little," Ed Malloy smiled. "We late for supper, Fred?"

Doctor Stanton stepped forward. "There's blood on your left ear, Ed," he said.

Ed Malloy reached up his hand. "I was bitten," he grinned, "by a horsefly."

Fred Baldwin gulped. "Horseflies in January, Ed?"

"There were funny things out in that storm," the teller said. "It's good you stayed indoors, Fred."

Doctor Stanton grinned. "Where are the horseflies now, son?" he asked.

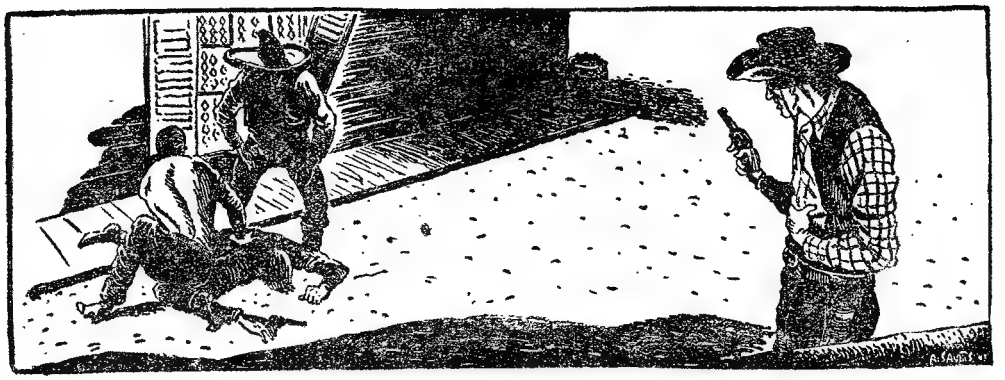
Ed Malloy scratched his chin. "Reckon you'll find them in the sheriff's jail, doc."

The cashier's eyes bulged. "It was that hit on the head, doc," he whispered.

"Don't worry about him," Doctor Stanton smiled. "Ed Malloy can take care of himself." The doctor grinned at the younger man before him. "And others too, I'm thinking."

# A SADDLEPARD FOR SATAN

By CLEM YAGER



**Saddlepards they were, sure — but did that mean they'd side each other even against the law?**

IT was one of those lean years in the cow country and its mark lay on the two men's faces. In the studied squint of their eyes, in the straight lines of their lips now growing unused to laughter, in the flatness of their voices and in the edge to their tempers.

They were young, in their early twenties, but the lush years lay behind them and in the overstocked range lands and catastrophic fall of cattle prices they read only hopelessness and futility. A bitter futility rankled them and brought a biting anger.

The wind was cold. It drove at them from out of the north and they were thankful for the buildings of the town that broke the force of the wind and took the rawness out of its sting. The cold lay in the ground, too, hard-frozen, that was a sounding pan to the fall of their horses' hoofs.

They pulled in their mounts before Kelly's Cafe but they did not dismount. Through the plate glass window they could see the counter and the stacks of dishes and cups and the pies and cakes on display. Anger smoldered in the two men's eyes.

The dark one, who was Roy Waters, said, "How much we got left?"

Bob Harshany, who was tall and slim and with tawny hair that lay long and uncut over his ears, felt the two thin coins in his jumper pocket.

"Two dimes," he said.

Roy Waters turned his hot gaze away from the window. He looked up and down the street. He said nothing.

Fingering the handle of the sixshooter that rode on his right hip, Harshany said slowly, "We can always sell these."

Waters laughed. It must have been a laugh for it wasn't a snarl or a bark or a cry, but it wasn't a genuine, full-fledged laugh either.

"I'll use mine before I sell it," he said.

"Don't be a fool, Roy!"

"That's just exactly what I ain't aiming to be," said Waters, swinging to the ground. "Come on, Bob. We got enough for a cup of coffee, anyway."

Inside it was warm. The heat crawled through their worn clothing and lay soothingly comfortable on their flesh. They walked to the counter and sat down on the stools.

The girl behind the counter was tall and slim and her hair was the color of

a golden bay horse Harshany had once broken down on the Pecos. She smiled impersonally at them.

"What'll it be, boys?" she asked.

Waters scowled. "Two cups of coffee," he said.

The girl looked them over. She hesitated a moment, then asked, "Anything else?"

Waters said angrily, "We gave our order."

The girl started for the kitchen. In the doorway she paused and said over her shoulder, "We—we can mark you down."

Waters brought his right hand down loudly on the counter. A flush lay heavily on his features. He said, "I don't want charity," and, rising to his feet, he started for the door.

Harshany said, "Roy!"

"Go to the devil!"

"Roy! Wait a minute!"

But the door slammed and through the window Harshany could see his companion swinging angrily down the street. Harshany turned back to the counter with a muffled curse.

The girl came out of the kitchen. She placed a cup of coffee before Harshany and he looked up and caught the crimson on her face.

"I'm sorry, cowboy," she said.

"It's all right, ma'am. Roy is awfully touchy. I've known him since we were kids and he always was like this. Maybe it's because his pa was a no-good, drunken bum, always beggin' a handout. Anyway, Roy is awful touchy about that."

"I didn't mean anything," the girl explained. "Times are tough. We're carrying a lot of you boys on our books. As soon as times get better, dad and I know you'll pay. But it's hard going right now and I think we folks should all try and help one another."

"I understand, ma'am. Only Roy, he's so doggone touchy."

"And you, cowboy? Are you touchy, too?"

His jaw set stubbornly. "I'll pay you, ma'am. Soon's I get a job. No matter where I am, I'll send you what I owe. If you don't believe that, don't mark me down!"

The girl smiled wanly. "I believe you, cowboy. Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked."

"It's hell," Harshany said defensively. "The range overstocked, prices going down to next to nothing and cattlemen going broke right and left."

"It sure is tough. But times will change, cowboy. You'll see better days again."

"I know that. Only wish I could make Roy see it that way, too."

"He'll come around to it. All right, cowboy. What'll you have? . . ."

AFTER he had eaten, Harshany rose to his feet and mumbled his thanks. The girl smiled. "You're always welcome, cowboy."

He looked at her and their eyes met and Harshany didn't know why but all at once his face colored and he felt uncomfortable and not a little angry. So he muttered, "Reckon I'll go look for Roy."

He went outside into the bitter cold. He looked at his mount and Roy's, standing tail-end to the sweep of the wind, and, mounting, he headed for the stable leading Waters' black behind him.

Harshany told the barnman bluntly, "I ain't got the money to pay for their keep. But I ain't gonna let them stand outside in this cold with no feed."

The barnman grinned. "I like horses, mister. That's why I'm in this business. You take care of them personal and I reckon I can find room for them."

Afterward, Harshany went out and stared down the street and thought he'd look into the Alhambra first of all. The place was warm and tobacco smoke made a haze about the oil lamps that now were burning for the early darkness was falling rapidly. Harshany spotted Waters seated in a chair against the wall opposite from the bar.

Though the urge was in him to feel the raw taste of whiskey down his throat, Harshany moved toward his partner. He knew a slight shame for he had

eaten and he could see in Roy Waters' drawn face that hunger still was in him.

Harshany could find no words to say so he just nodded. Waters merely ran his eyes briefly over his partner's face, then looked away.

Studying the half-dozen men in the barroom, Harshany asked, "How's it look, Roy?"

"It's the same old story. Nobody's hiring nothing."

Harshany fingered the coins in his pocket. "I still got our two dimes, Roy. You take 'em and eat."

"I'm all right."

"Don't be like that, Roy."

"I'll be all right!"

"You're stubborn as a mule. I ate. You take these."

Waters smiled strangely. "I don't need them, Bob. I got something lined up."

A cold fear ran through Bob Harshany. He looked at his partner closely.

"What you mean?"

"Let's go outside and I'll cut you in . . ."

NIGHT had fallen and it seemed that with the coming of darkness the wind had taken on an added chill and there was the breath of snow in the air. The two men walked up the street until they came to the shelter of the sunken doorway of a harness shop.

Waters raised his jumper collar about his neck and shoved his hands into his pockets. Harshany asked, "Well?"

Waters stared at the ground. He said quietly, "I know how you feel about this, Bob, and I reckon you'll fly off the handle, but I'm asking you not to. Anyway, wait until I'm done."

Premonition sent its cold chill down Harshany's spine. "Well?" he asked again.

Waters spoke with quiet bitterness, the words falling off his tongue with rancid softness. "There's no use kiddin' ourselves, Bob. The breaks are against us. We worked hard down on the Pecos. Well, we lost our jobs and the bank went bust. We wandered all over Hades and back and we ain't even had the smell of a job. Well, Bob, if I can't get money by working at a job, I'll get it some other way. You with me?"

Though it was not unexpected, it left Bob Harshany a little shaken. He had known it was coming, had known it for a couple of weeks. He had known it from the frequency of Roy's brooding silence.

When Harshany said nothing, Waters went on, "I worked hard all my life. I denied myself a lot of fun. And what did that get me? We can't get a job no more and I ain't one to take charity. I'm going back to the Alhambra and clean out the till. You coming with me?"

Harshany said hoarsely, "For gosh's sake, Roy, take it easy!"

"I've took it easy long enough."

"You ain't got a chance. You won't get away with it."

Waters smiled wryly. "If I don't—well, anything's better than this."

An edge crept into Harshany's voice. "I'm not letting you do it, Roy."

Waters smiled, a brief slash of white in the darkness. Harshany felt the barrel of Roy's sixshooter hard against his stomach.

"Don't try to stop me, Bob," Waters said softly. "We ain't partners no more. So don't you try and stop me."

"Roy," he said desperately. "Don't be a damn fool, Roy."

"You stay right here," said Waters. "You stay plumb out of everything. You get in my way, Bob, and I'll kill you!"

Slowly, gun still leveled, Waters backed out of the doorway until he was beyond his partner's reach. Then Waters whirled quickly, holstering his weapon, and went swinging down the street with long, rapid strides.

Harshany watched him go. He knew the impulse to draw his gun and call out to Roy to stop but Harshany realized that would not work. Waters knew Harshany would not shoot and Waters would only laugh in his bitter, biting way.

There was nothing Harshany could do but stand and watch as Waters reached the Alhambra.

HARSHANY did not know what prompted him but he started down the street. Waters had made his play. There was nothing Harshany could do now. Yet he drove the thought from his mind, telling himself that he had to do something.

He walked swiftly, ears tuned for the sudden, jarring crash of gun thunder but the only break in the silence was the moaning of the wind.

He had just reached the Alhambra when the shots came. Three of them, quick-spaced and jarringly loud. Then Roy Waters' voice sounded.

"Just don't let no one else try anything. You all stay put right where you are. First man pokes his head outside gets it."

In that brief instant, Harshany's decision was made. Gone was that stubborn faith of his. He knew only that he had an obligation born out of years of friendship and, right or wrong, he, Bob Harshany, was going to stick by his partner.

Thus it was that as Roy Waters came backing out of the Alhambra, Harshany had untied the two horses and was waiting. Waters whirled, gun leveled, and Harshany spied the pale shade of pain on his partner's face and the blood starting to show on his shirt.

As Roy hesitated, Harshany said, "I'm with you, Roy."

Waters still hesitated, brief seconds that were an eternity as an outcry began inside the Alhambra. Then Waters acted. His gun blasted, orange flame lancing the darkness, and Bob Harshany felt the breath of the bullet past his cheek. Instinctively, he yanked out his gun.

"Roy!" he cried.

He could not believe it, did not want to believe it. But again Waters fired, fast upon the heels of his first shot and again his bullet was intended for Harshany.

"Roy!" Harshany cried again.

Harshany's gun was in his hand. The words were on his tongue but he could not speak. He did not know what manner of madness possessed Waters that had made a frenzied killer out of him.

Waters was poised for another shot and Harshany, praying that he might die, too, pulled the trigger. Waters' shot blasted into the ground and then he was falling as the doors of the Alhambra split open.

Harshany was on his knees beside his partner, sobbing brokenly, "I only wanted to help you, Roy. What got into you? What got into you?"

Waters said in a weakening voice that broke with difficulty through the bloody froth on his lips, "Damn you, Bob. I'd have made my get-away sure. But you stopped me, you dirty son. I'd have got away for sure. Oh, you dirty, dirty son."

LIGHT was spilling out the open door and the bystanders had made a lane so that the glow fell on the dying man's face. There was hate in Waters' voice but Harshany, catching the last life in the man's eyes, read the pleading there.

Comprehension hit Harshany then and he nodded slightly to Waters and it seemed that a smile came to those eyes before they were abruptly empty.

Harshany rose to his feet. There were a lot of backslaps and congratulatory words but he walked away from them for he wanted to be alone.

Wounded, knowing that Harshany would sacrifice anything to help his partner, Waters had forced Harshany to shoot him. And those dying curses. They had been for the benefit of the watchers and that pleading look in his eyes that Harshany had understood and answered.

That knowledge would ease the pain of remembrance as the years went by.

He found himself in front of Kelly's Cafe. The girl was outside, having just locked up. Her face was pale and drawn. She looked up at Harshany and he read the compassion on her features.

She said softly, "I saw it all, cowboy. I understand."

He looked at her and suddenly those old dreams were coming back and the old hope that tomorrow, surely, things would change.

# VENGEANCE TRAIL

By JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

**THE MYSTERIOUS MARAUDER HAD COLDLY WATCHED EIGHT PEOPLE MASSACRED, TO GET HIS HANDS ON THE GOLD BULLION THE BLACK BLUFF STAGE CARRIED. AND ONE OF THE FIEND'S VICTIMS WAS KEN LESLIE'S SWEETHEART . . .**

CROSS FLATS' dusty street was almost empty when he reined into it, and in the harsh glare of afternoon sun he made a rather forbidding figure, a gaunt, weather-blackened man with bitter agate-blue eyes and an expression of relentless determination about his tight-pressed lips. He rode slowly, with a kind of exaggerated deliberation, but there was no real ease in his movements, rather the sort of restraint which comes of rigid self-imposed patience, behind which lies a trembling, tight-coiled spring.

Had his face betrayed any evidence of humor, it might have been handsome; as it was, it remained arresting. There was something about the high cheekbones and the sharp slant of the jaw which gave his countenance a keen questing quality, an alertness which immediately set it apart.

He let the dusty roan slow to a walk as he started along the street. A third of the way down he reached a plank sign reading, Stable and Feed, and turned in. Dismounting, he led the roan into the rear corral, exchanged a few words with the sleepy hostler concerning his gear, and returned to the street.

A scant block away he found the place he wanted, a two-story hotel with a veranda and plate-glass front. He went

The Apache crumpled at Ken's feet as a rifle spoke.

in, stood a moment as his eyes adjusted to the relative dimness and crossed to the desk.

A dark-haired girl arose from a checker game on the other side of the lobby and came toward him.

He took off his hat with the same slow deliberation which marked all his movements, and spoke.

"I'm Ken Leslie. Come to see John Evans. He has my letter."

She was silent a moment, surveying him with evident curiosity. "I'll see if he's awake. Will you wait here?"

He nodded, and she crossed to the stairs and went up. The other checker-player, an elderly white-haired man dressed in townsman's clothes, looked toward him with interest and an open desire to speak, but after a single glance, Ken leaned against the desk and looked away. He was staring out of the window at the flat monotony of frame saloon fronts across the street when the girl returned.

"He'll see you," she said. "But please don't stay long and try not to—excite him—more than you can help. He's very sick, you know."

"I know," he said. He followed her up the stairs and she stopped in front of a door just off the landing.

"He's in here," she explained. "You can go right in."

She smiled and hesitated momentarily, and she was a pretty girl, but all he said was, "Thank you, miss", with scarcely a glance at her, and opened the door.

The bed paralleled the windows on the opposite side of the room and he crossed to it at once. "You're John Evans? You were there?"

The wasted pillow-propped figure before him looked up with quizzical interest and nodded. "I'm what is left of John Evans. I was there, and I'm still there when I get too tired not to think. You're Leslie then?"

Ken nodded, sat down on the single chair alongside the bed and leaned forward. "The white man. Did you get a look at him?"

John Evans' sunken eyes met his own and a sudden wild light danced in them. "That devil! I'd die content if I could see him strung up!"

THEN he shrugged and the old weary patience of a dying man, a man beyond hope, came into his face and his voice fell to a whisper.

"We couldn't see him. Just a glimpse. And he was too far away. He stayed behind the rocks. He bossed the attack, but he kept his own hide safe. Let the 'Paches do the work." He paused for breath and went on. "We put up a good fight, outnumbered as we were. I think the 'Paches would've quit, if *he* hadn't kept yelling —pushing them on."

Ken let him rest a minute and then asked his other question. "The woman. How did—she go?" He gripped the edges of his chair until the knuckles turned white. Sweat broke out on his forehead as John Evans started to speak.

"We tried to protect her at first. Kept her on the stage floor, away from the doors. But when Bill Connerton got hit, she took up his gun and fought with the rest of us—just like a man." He paused, breathing heavily, exhausted by talk and the ordeal of painful recollection.

Ken bent forward. "Go on. What else?"

John Evans' voice grew weaker. "It's hard to remember. We told her to save one last round for herself. She said she would. I guess she knew what the 'Paches would do to her, if they got her alive. I can't remember. When they closed in, I was hit—four times. They must've thought I was dead. I guess they were in a hurry."

He stopped speaking and closed his eyes, the feverish, shriveled remnant of a man, waiting for death. An onlooker not close enough to notice the faint flutter of his breath would have supposed him a corpse.

Ken Leslie murmured his thanks, stood up and crossed to the door, the bitter sense of frustration sharp within him. He had learned a little, but nothing definite enough to go ahead on. The identity of the white renegade remained a complete mystery. John Evans, the

single survivor of the stagecoach massacre, had merely glimpsed him, could not offer a clue. And even John Evans, he realized, would be dead in a matter of days.

He went down the stairs and strode slowly toward the desk. The pretty dark-haired girl was behind it now and she looked up at him with a kind of expectancy and seemed about to ask a question. When she saw his face however, she dropped her eyes and said nothing.

"I'd better have a room," he said. He signed the register, accepted the key which she lifted from the adjacent keyboard and tramped back up the stairs. Locating his room, he went in, tossed his hat on the bed, took off his sun-bleached calico shirt and washed at the cramped copper sink. Later he walked back to the livery stable, satisfied himself that the roan had been properly fed and watered, sorted out some of his gear and presently returned to the hotel.

He sat on the edge of the straw-mattress cot and tried to think.

HE knew he could never rest until he killed with his own hands the white man who was responsible for Connie Weatherby's death—the white man who had coldly watched eight people massacred in order to obtain the sack of gold bullion carried on the Black Bluff stage. The outlaw Apaches involved in the attack deserved to die, and yet he considered them less responsible than their white ringleader. Many of them had been brutally treated by the whites and it was not difficult to understand how, inflamed by tiswin and hot words, they might be goaded into a massacre.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would ride out to the Black Bluff Apache Reservation, a half day's travel to the north. There was just a chance that the agent in charge might be able to give him some information. He had made his resolve. He would never give up, not even if it took him the rest of his life.

He left the hotel and roamed restlessly through the streets, stopping at several saloons in order to listen to the bar gossip. A phrase, a chance word, might prove to be the clue which he was waiting for.

Towards dusk he saw a sign reading, Harlow's Supplies and Merchandise, and decided to buy a little biscuit flour and some beans for the next day's trip.

The proprietor came down the aisle as he entered and he listed his wants. He had paid and was about to leave when something about the storekeeper's face caught his attention.

He pretended a sudden interest in a barrel of crackers and as the fellow bent over to scoop crackers into a small sack, he studied him carefully. The face, even behind its rather elaborate brush of beard, was familiar. Somewhere he had seen it before.

He paid for the crackers and departed, probing his memory for the time or place which would establish the identity of the black-bearded storekeeper.

He had been polite enough, but somehow his politeness seemed hollow. Behind it there had been a sort of surly furtiveness, a distinct unfriendliness which his remarks about the weather and solicitude concerning Ken's needs had not been able to mask. Ordinarily Ken would have paid little attention, but for some reason the storekeeper's bearded face stuck in his memory.

He returned to the hotel, moody and reflective, and went to bed, but hours passed before he slept. At first he kept seeing the storekeeper's face and he tried to imagine what it would look like with the beard shaved off, but whenever he was on the brink of recognition the image blurred and the beard came back on and he had to start over again. And then, as always just before he fell asleep, the image of Connie Weatherby was before him. He saw her as she must have looked getting on the stage at Black Bluff, happy and eager, impatient to get started, thinking warmly and probably a little shyly about her coming marriage to him. And then he pictured Canyon Trail and shared what must have been her first sickening premonition of disaster as the barrier loomed into view and

the horses reared to a halt. And, finally, a complete hell of torment was on him, as he imagined the first shots crack out and saw those lean bronzed bodies writhing from rock to rock while a voice, a white man's voice, shrilly urged them on.

AT LAST, mercifully, he slept and when he awoke, sun was streaming in the window and he could hear the creak of a spring wagon passing up the street.

He lay still a few moments, collecting his thoughts and listening to the rising morning sounds, but as always during these past months the old impatience was quickly upon him and he arose and dressed.

As he passed through the downstairs lobby, the dark-haired desk girl greeted him cheerfully. He nodded briefly and went out, and as he started along the boardwalk, she crossed to the front windows and watched him out of sight.

The sun was already high and he hurried along, wishing he had gotten an earlier start. As he passed the sign reading, Harlow's Supplies and Merchandise, he glanced up quickly and someone drew back from the doorway. For just a moment he considered returning and entering the store on some pretext, but he decided against it.

While he assembled his small pack in one of the stable rooms, the black-bearded face of the storekeeper came again to his mind and he was so absorbed in trying to associate it with something, he hardly noticed when the hostler appeared. He watched the roan led from the rear corral, roped his pack behind the pommel, paid the livery charges and rode into the street.

Just then it occurred to him with a small start that he had not had breakfast. Reining up in front of a sign reading, Cross Flats' Cafe, he hitched his pony to the tie rail and hurried inside, ordering bacon and eggs and a pot of coffee.

By the time he reached the edge of town it was mid-morning and he touched his spurs to the roan and settled himself in the saddle for the long ride ahead.

As he advanced the level tableland surrounding Cross Flats merged into a series of low rolling hills and at length the roan was laboring up a succession of sandy bluffs which supported a few stunted juniper. He stopped, letting the horse blow, and looked back, and Cross Flats was just a diminishing blur on the horizon.

By noon he was out of the bluffs on a boulder-strewn mesa where the heat of the sun seemed to become more intense by the minute. He let the roan pick its own immediate way, but bore always to the northwest.

The mesa slid away to a downgrade slashed by widening gullies and then he was rising again and in the distance grass-covered foothills gradually broke into view. These, he knew, marked the fringe of the Black Bluffs Apache Reservation.

For nearly an hour he rode among these slowly-lifting hills and finally the welcome smell of pine was in the air and his horse pricked up its ears and hurried, sensing water.

He reached it at last, a shallow mountain-fed stream rustling among rocks just beyond the first scattered clumps of pine.

Dismounting, he let the roan drink, ground haltered it, carried his pack to a patch of shade and built a small fire.

HE prepared biscuits and beans and coffee while the roan grazed contentedly alongside the stream. The gurgling whisper of water over stones and the cooler air moving from the pine slopes made him relax in spite of himself and when he had finished the simple meal, he began to feel sleepy. Rousing himself with an effort, he collected his few utensils, carefully put out the fire and fastened his pack behind the pommel.

He was just about to swing into the saddle when something caused him to turn around. He had heard nothing and seen nothing, but the impulse was urgent, unmistakable. Two Apaches stood under

a nearby pine, their rifles aimed unwaveringly at his chest.

They had, he realized, slipped from tree to tree down the slope while he ate, their mocassins making no audible sound on the thick mat of pine needles.

For just an instant he considered making a desperate reach for his gun, but he understood the hopelessness of it and instead raised his hands.

They emerged from the tree's shadow and came toward him, scowling, their bright black eyes never leaving his face. They wore breechclouts, and around their loose black hair bandeaux of red calico.

One of them approached, lifted his Colt from its holster and motioned him toward the pines. He moved forward and the Apache fell in behind him, rifle held ready in the crook of his arm. Presently the other caught up, riding Ken's horse, and they directed him through the trees toward the top of the slope.

Farther along, just beyond the turn of a rocky trail, they had their own horses tethered.

The one on the roan dismounted, and after they had gotten astride their own ponies, they motioned him into the saddle.

Guiding their mounts on either side slightly to the rear, they started him forward. He watched the terrain carefully, aware however that his chances of escape under the circumstances would be about one in ten thousand.

The trail twisted downhill into a dry wash, skirted the mouth of a small box canyon and led onto another steeper slope where the pine growth was almost dense. Presently they broke from these deeper shadows onto a grassy plateau and in the distance brush wikiups came into view.

In a quarter-hour they rode among them and Ken found himself the object of sullen curiosity. The men were silent and though a few of the squaws muttered imprecations, no one made a move to harm him. His captors impassively guided him through the scattered wikiups, crossed to the edge of the plateau and entered a pine grove. Here, screened from the plateau by the trees, was a stout log building surrounded by a number of smaller frame structures.

ONE of the Apaches dismounted, went inside the large building and in a moment returned with a white man.

He was hatless, tall and loose, with a startling shock of long yellow hair. As he approached, Ken at once noticed his eyes, cat-like tawny-yellow, narrowed now with suspicion.

There appeared to be no friendliness in him. He stopped a few feet away and spoke. "What's your name, stranger? And what's your business on this reservation?"

Briefly, Ken told his story. The reservation agent listened impassively, scraping his chin with the back of his hand. He appeared to be genuinely interested and at length he nodded.

"Sounds pretty straight, Leslie. Climb down and come in."

Ken followed him inside. They entered a large central room, cool in half shadows, and the agent motioned him to a chair.

His tawny eyes took on an expression of rather amused apology. "Sorry if my boys threw a scare into you. They're reservation police. Patrol the boundaries to keep off drifters who might cause trouble. Technically, it's a federal offense to trespass on the reservation." He waved his hand. "In your case, of course, we'll forget it."

Passing Ken a cigarette, he lit one himself and continued. "Wish I could help you, Leslie. Since that stagecoach job, every Apache on the reservation has been under suspicion. Damned uncomfortable." He spread his hands. "But it looks hopeless. Those outlaw bucks are probably holed up in Mexico by now. Long since. Been months. The white man"—he shrugged—"probably headed for the coast. Or maybe went back east. He wouldn't stick in these parts."

Ken realized the logic of his remarks and again his hopes sank. The trail, if trail there was, seemed faint indeed.

The agent, who introduced himself as Henry Shate, chatted a few minutes longer and excused himself. He returned presently and led Ken to an outer room where a fat Indian woman had prepared coffee and a kind of frijole cake.

Out of politeness Ken forced himself to eat a little, but he was anxious to be off and did not linger once the simple meal was out of the way.

Shate, who saw him to the saddle, invited him to spend the night on the reservation. Ken thanked him, but declined.

The agent grinned at him like a good-natured cat. "You won't have any trouble getting out. I've passed the word."

Ken thanked him again, shook hands and rode out through the pine grove. As he passed through the wikiup area this second time, there were no imprecations. But neither were there any greetings.

By the time he reached the stream where the two Apache police had apprehended him, the sun was slanting long shadows down the pine slope. He was in a restless, rather irritable mood, however, and decided not to camp. With the sun declining, the ride back to Cross Flats would be cooler and it would give him a chance to think.

HE was just passing the last trees on the edge of the reservation area when something white attached to a pine trunk caught his attention. It was a dodger, old and tattered and faded, but as he studied it, something fell into place and with a queer little shock of recognition he knew where he had seen the face before. It was the black-bearded storekeeper in Cross Flats—without the beard. He remembered now that he had seen the dodger somewhere else months before.

He read the notice, guessing where the weather had blotted out a word. "Wanted. Reward. Vergil Hawley. For robbery in Whetstone City. Five hundred dollars reward will be paid to the person . . ."

Ken felt a sudden surge of hope. If Hawley had committed a robbery in Whetstone City, it was highly possible that he had also engaged in further depredations. And a comfortable storekeeper's berth in Cross Flats would be just the right disguise to deflect suspicion.

He studied the dodger carefully once more and touched the roan into motion. He had a lead now, and it looked like a good one. Of course the mere fact that Hawley had committed a robbery was not by any means conclusive proof that he had led the Canyon Trail massacre. He would have to move cautiously and gather more direct evidence.

It was well after midnight when he rode into Cross Flats. After turning the horse into the livery corral, he tramped back up the boardwalk toward the hotel. Moonlight silvered the cheap frame buildings into a kind of ghostly beauty and there was something about the silent deserted streets which at other times might have touched him, but tonight his mind was too preoccupied and he felt none of it.

The day's ride had tired him; for once he fell asleep within a few minutes and he was still sleeping the next morning when a sudden pounding on the door brought him awake with a start. He called out, "Who is it?" and reached for his clothes.

He recognized the voice of the desk girl. "It's Crista Benton. John Evans wants to see you. Hurry—I think he's dying!"

Dressing hurriedly, he buckled on his gun belt and stepped into the corridor.

Crista Benton regarded him solemnly. "He's almost gone. He wants to tell you something."

John Evans' life hung by the frailest thread. His breathing was labored and irregular and there was a wild shine in his eyes which could mean only one thing.

Crista Benton stood just inside the door. An elderly bespectacled man whom Ken took to be the doctor hovered near the bed.

Ken crossed the room and bent over the dying man. John Evans' feverish eyes appeared not to recognize him for a

moment, but a bony hand shot out and clutched his shirt.

His voice was a broken, almost inaudible whisper. "Breckmill. The scout. He's—in town. Tell him—I sent you. We were partners once. He knows Apaches. Maybe he can—" His voice trailed off and he closed his eyes.

Ken realized the uselessness of questions. He straightened and glanced at the doctor. "How long?"

The doctor shrugged. "An hour—or less."

Ken paused at the door long enough to thank Crista Benton and returned to his room. Twenty minutes later he was in the Crown Saloon, inquiring after Breckmill, the scout.

He found him, finally, in a small restaurant situated on a side street on the south edge of town.

ALTHOUGH there was a cautious reserve in his manner, Breckmill politely invited Ken to share his table and state his business. He was a small man, wiry and agile looking, burned snuff-brown by the sun. His slate-grey eyes were inscrutable, but a network of tiny wrinkles along each corner of his mouth gave him an oddly benign appearance. Noting his build and his straight black hair, Ken wondered if he might be part Apache.

Breckmill listened impassively, sipping coffee, as Ken told his story. He was silent for some minutes afterward, but when he spoke he had made up his mind.

"I don't meddle much," he said. "But John Evans was my friend—and it's not easy to turn down a dying man. Besides that, I'd like to see the day when the Apaches settle down. It's white men like this one you're after that cause a great deal of the ruckus. I'll do what I can, Leslie."

His instructions were that Ken remain unobtrusively in town. He would make no promises. If he had not contacted Ken within a fortnight, it was to be assumed that he had failed.

Ken thanked him and left. He chafed at the thought of holing up in Cross Flats, but decided he had no alternative and settled himself in the old mould of patience. There was a good chance that Breckmill might uncover something. He knew Apaches as well as any man in the territory.

Ken angled toward the center of town, wondering how he could spend these days of waiting which lay ahead. Just as he reached the hotel, several men pushed out onto the boardwalk carrying a blanket-covered form on a crude homemade stretcher.

Ken took off his hat, entered the lobby and went up the stairs. Crista Benton stood in the corridor at the top of the landing and as he glanced toward her, he saw that she was sobbing. He hesitated, finally putting his hand on her shoulder. She glanced up, gratefully.

"I'll miss him, I guess. He was a care, but he'd always spoken kindly to me."

Ken looked through the open door into John Evans' empty room and nodded. "It takes a time to forget," he said. He left her then and moved toward his room.

The next week dragged interminably. He made cautious inquiries concerning the black-bearded storekeeper whose shaven face had decorated the dodger specifying Vergil Hawley. He learned that Hawley, who was using the name, Thomas Steele, had bought out Harlow, the original storekeeper, about a month before. Nobody knew much about him. He had arrived a stranger and remained one. But he ran the little emporium well enough and he kept out of trouble. Nobody had ever ventured to question him concerning the past. The code of the territory demanded that a man be accepted at face value. No one, so far as Ken could learn, had seen the dodger, and no one connected Hawley with the stagecoach massacre. His masquerade had been completely successful.

KEN realized, however, that he still lacked proof. And that, perhaps, was what Breckmill might supply.

The second week was drawing to a close and he was about to conclude that

the scout had failed, when Breckmill appeared at the hotel.

He came up the stairs just at dusk and rapped at Ken's door. "Get your horse," he said. "We've got a ride ahead."

In order to avoid attracting attention, Ken rode out of town alone and met him some distance out on the flats.

The scout rode silently for a time, finally turning toward Ken. "I found an Apache who'll talk. You got any gold?"

Ken nodded. "Eagles enough for an Injun."

Breckmill indicated his approval and fell silent again. He was laconic by nature and his long association with Indians had accentuated this trait.

They veered suddenly south. The scout studied the terrain carefully and finally found what he wanted: a faint trail heading southwest off the flats toward a stretch of broken malpais. They reached this, dipped into a gorge which was startlingly dark after the open flats, and climbed its steep opposite slope. Further along the malpais they reached the rim of a larger gully and the scout stopped.

He waved toward the deep darkness below. "He's down there, if he came. Better hand me your gun, Leslie. You might get riled. And I keep my word—even with Injuns."

Ken hesitated only momentarily and handed over his six-shooter. A wrong move now might spoil the game.

Breckmill shoved it under his belt and started his horse down the gully. Reaching bottom, they threaded their way around massive boulders, Breckmill leading the way.

The smell of burning mesquite hung on the air and as they rounded a shoulder of rock the faint glow of a campfire broke the darkness.

Breckmill stopped his horse and spoke softly. A reply came back at once and he went forward into the circle of firelight.

The Apache sitting cross-legged by the fire inclined his head slightly and shot a keen glance toward Ken. He was raggedly dressed in a white man's discarded trousers and shirt. Even in repose, there was a kind of sullen ferocity about his flat features.

After ground haltering their horses, Breckmill and Ken sat down by the small fire. The scout drew a tobacco pouch and offered it to the Apache. The Indian shook his head. Breckmill said nothing, rolled himself a cigarette, and sat staring into the fire. Ken grew impatient, but understood the little ritual which the situation demanded and made no comment.

FINALLY Breckmill spoke a few words to the Apache, who nodded in reply. Ken watched closely and at length noticed the Indian stiffen to attention as the scout went on talking in the Apache tongue.

As the scout finished, an expression of malice and sly cunning crept into the Indian's face. Shooting a quick searching glance toward Ken, he reached inside his frayed shirt and drew out a white silk scarf, a woman's scarf with the initials "CW" stitched in the center in bright blue thread.

Ken was seized with a sudden hot overwhelming desire to kill. He reached toward his now empty holster and half arose as the Indian drew back with a hissing intake of breath.

Breckmill's voice cut in, sharp as the crack of a bullwhip.

"Quit it, Leslie! There's your proof! Remember it's the white man you're after!"

Ken settled himself with an effort and sat down. The Apache watched him narrowly as Breckmill spoke again.

He turned toward Ken. "He wants to see the color of your money."

Ken opened a shirt pocket and drew out a small leather bag. Contemptuously, he tossed it across the fire.

Opening it, the Apache poured a palmful of gold eagles onto the ground. Breckmill directed a question at him as he stared at the money, a look of gloating satisfaction on his face.

Breckmill spoke softly to Ken. "He'll name your man now."

The Apache looked up, darted a quick

glance toward the surrounding darkness and leaned forward.

He was just about to speak when the sudden nerve-tingling crack of a rifle split the night. The Indian jerked visibly with an expression of rather grotesque astonishment and pitched forward across the fire.

Breckmill yelled, "Lookout!", threw himself sideways and rolled into the shadows.

Ken instinctively flattened himself along the ground an instant before the rifle spoke again. The second bullet raked a boulder just beyond the circle of firelight and ricocheted down the gully with a wicked little whine.

Breckmill called somewhere from the darkness as Ken rolled out of the firelight toward his horse.

The scout's voice was urgent. "Ride out, Leslie! Try the far slope!"

Ken found his horse and gained the saddle as a third rifle shot rang out. Halfway up the near slope, on his right, he saw a little flicker of flame and reached for his gun. He cursed then, as he remembered that Breckmill had it. Already he could hear hoof beats as the scout started his own horse down the gully.

Realizing that both of them would have a better chance if they separated, he decided to forget the gun and concentrate on getting out of the gully alive. Hurrying his horse behind an outcropping of rock, he paused for a moment to get his bearings and started up the gully, angling toward the left hand slope.

SEVERAL more shots cracked out, apparently fired at random. He heard two of them smack against rocks along the bottom of the gully. Another struck higher up and started a minature landslide of loose shale and pebbles.

Crouching low in the saddle, he guided the roan up the lefthand slope. He had nearly reached the top when another sudden racket of gunfire broke loose far down the gully. He could distinguish both rifle shots and the steady crash of a .45.

As his horse reached level ground, the firing ceased. He stopped and peered down into the gully. It was just an irregular patch of darkness and he could hear nothing.

Wondering whether Breckmill had gotten out alive, he started west along the malpais, intending to make a wide circle before he struck the tableland adjacent to Cross Flats.

He would return to town and wait until daylight. There was nothing else to do. He had no gun and if Breckmill had not escaped, he was probably beyond help in any case. The night's work was spoiled and once again when he had thought himself on the brink of success, all his efforts and waiting had come to nothing. Either Breckmill or the Apache had been careless. Someone had either learned of the rendezvous and hidden in the gully or had trailed them across the flats after dark.

As he circled toward town however, a sudden disquieting thought came to him. Could Breckmill be trusted? Might he not be allied with the Apaches—possibly even a leader? Was it sheer coincidence that he had demanded Ken's gun before entering the gully? Was it possible that the night's work had been carefully planned—a neatly laid trap which when sprung would eliminate both a traiterous loose-tongued Apache and a prying, troublesome white man? John Evans had not seen Breckmill for years; and a man who lived like an Indian, who understood Indians, might change.

As he neared town, he tried to shake off these thoughts. Breckmil had taken his gun and would have had ample opportunity to kill him. He was a fool, he told himself; he had come to trust no one.

He spent an uneasy, almost sleepless night pondering his next move and finally decided to ride back to the gully the following morning. There was just a slim chance that whoever shot the Apache might have left some telltale evidence.

He breakfasted early and spent some time making inquiries about town concerning Breckmill, but no one had seen the scout. If he had escaped, he had not returned to Cross Flats.

Fearing the worst, Ken walked wearily toward the livery stables. As he neared the rear corral, the hostler caught sight of him and hurried up.

He held out a gun and a piece of paper. "Catched some Injun sneakin' around here a few minutes ago. Said these were for you. Wouldn't talk; seemed in a pow'ful hurry."

Ken recognized the gun as his own. Thanking the hostler, he unfolded the piece of paper and bent to read a laboriously scrawled note: "Leslie—I got out. I got some interestin' news you will like. Not safe in town. Meet me at Seven Buttes at noon. Hurry. Breckmill."

Hastily stuffing the note in a pocket, Ken caught the roan and saddled up. Seven Buttes, a pinnacle rock landmark somewhat south of the Apache Reservation, was a long three hours' ride. He would have to hurry if he were to reach it by noon.

THE roan was frisky and he rode it out of town at a gallop. Once on the open flats, Ken settled the horse into a steady run and headed directly west. A few miles out he passed a freighter headed for Cross Flats and was tempted to stop and question the teamster. He decided against it however. Breckmill's note sounded urgent and he could not risk arriving late at Seven Buttes.

Although it was his custom to take great care of a horse, he drove the roan now to the limit of its endurance. In less than an hour rolling hills succeeded the tableland and soon thereafter he was crossing a regular series of hogback ridges which fringed the rough country beyond.

An hour before noon the finger-like spires of Seven Buttes broke the horizon and he stopped to rest the roan.

The sun was directly overhead when he crossed into the twisting canyon which debouched at the base of the Buttes. He was traversing the farther end of the canyon, letting the roan pick its own way, when a sudden sharp command rang out.

"Reach high, Leslie!"

Caught completely off guard, he froze in the saddle and slowly turned his head. Three rifles were pointed directly at the middle of his back. Inwardly cursing his carelessness, he raised his hands above his head. To reach for his own gun would be suicidal. And he had no chance to make a break. The rifles were only scant yards away.

As he watched, three Apaches stepped into the open. One of them came forward, lifted his gun from the holster and motioned him to dismount. Only when he was disarmed and afoot did the white man venture into the open.

Ken stared with astonishment as Henry Shate, the Reservation Agent, strolled around a corner of rock.

He was grinning, but wicked little lights danced in his eyes. He came up, cursing softly.

"You meddling fool! You got away last night, but you won't this time! You'll wish you'd never been born!"

Ken looked into the tawny-yellow eyes and suddenly sensed the savagery which lay behind them. Then, with a quick overpowering rush of blind fury, he understood that this was the man he was seeking, the man responsible for the massacre of Connie Weatherby. In spite of the rifles pointed at him, he lunged forward, lashing out with his fists. One of them caught the surprised Shate squarely in the face. The blow snapped the agent's head backward and sent him sprawling.

Ken leaped for him but his pounce was broken in mid-air as one of the Apaches swung a rifle butt savagely against the side of his head.

WHEN he regained consciousness, he was lying propped against a rock, tied hand and foot. Shate stood nearby, nursing a smashed lip. One of the Apaches spoke and the agent approached.

He stood regarding Ken for some moments with a kind of malignant relish.

Drawing back his foot with cold deliberation, he drove his heavy boot directly into Ken's face.

Ken's head crunched against the rock. He struggled wildly against his bonds, tasting hot blood in his mouth. Shate cursed him and kicked again. Twisting, he managed to struggle to his knees, but he got no further. The agent kicked again and again, with a maniacal frenzy, until Ken collapsed against the rock.

Shate's voice seemed to come from a vast distance. "Pry, will you? I should have killed you in the beginning. I'd kick you to death, if the Injuns didn't want a little fun. They'll roast you, you meddling damned fool, till you'll wish I had finished you!"

He paused, winded by his exertions, and went on. "I figured you'd fall for that phony note. I wrote it; Breckmill didn't. He's buzzard meat out on the malpais. Gunned him last night. He died easy, Leslie. A bullet in the belly. That's what you'll beg for in another hour."

The agent interrupted himself to murmur some instructions to one of the Apaches. The Indian splashed some cold water into Ken's face and propped him upright against the rock again.

Shate grunted his approval. "Sorry I can't stay to watch, Leslie. But my boys will keep you company. When they get through with you, there won't even be anything left for the buzzards!

"The bullion from that Canyon Trail stage is in my safe on the reservation, Leslie. Some day it'll buy me a business in the east. Just one more good haul and I'm leavin'. Everybody thinks the Injuns that pulled that job high-tailed to Mexico—they're right on the reservation, ready for work! Some of them even joined the search parties that were sent out to scout their trail!"

He gave some final orders to the Apaches and touched his horse into motion. Just before he rode out of sight the saddle and shouted back.
around a shoulder of rock, he turned in

"You're a fool, Leslie. No woman is worth what you'll go through!"

The Apaches lost no time. After throwing more cold water over Ken's face, they stripped off his shirt and boots and began scouring the area for faggots.

The Apaches returned presently with an armload of wood, dumped it at his feet and began shaving off small strips in order to start a fire. Ken closed his eyes, straining against the buckskin thongs which bit into his wrists and ankles. Soon the smell of woodsmoke reached his nostrils. When he opened his eyes, he saw the Apaches were watching him intently, savoring this last moment before his torture began.

As he gritted his teeth, one of them picked up a burning pine splinter and deliberately pressed it against the soles of his naked feet.

AS he jerked backward with the sudden shock and pain, the sharp crack of a rifle broke the silence and the Apache crumpled at his feet.

The other two Apaches stared in blank astonishment for a second and then bolted toward the nearby rock against which their rifles were placed. One of them dropped in his tracks as another report shattered the silence of the canyon. The third made a wild grab for his rifle, missed and kept on going in a frantic attempt to reach shelter. An instant before the rifle spoke again, he dodged behind a boulder and disappeared.

Ken threw himself flat and began wriggling toward cover.

He was still squirming away, an inch at a time, some five minutes later, when he heard swift footsteps behind him.

He heard someone's quick breathing and the cold blade of a knife slipped down between his wrists. He did not realize the buckskin thongs had been cut until his numb hands slid apart. A moment later the thongs securing his ankles were slashed. Then someone rolled him over and he looked up into the face of Cross Flats' bearded storekeeper, Vergil Hawley, alias Thomas Steele.

Hawley sheathed his knife and shook his head. "Good thing I hurried along, Leslie. Another half-hour and you wouldn't want to live!"

Ken stood up, disregarding the searing pain which shot through his feet. "Thanks! You after Shate, too?"

Hawley nodded. "My brother, Fred Hawley, was on that Black Bluff stage. I figured it might be Shate, but I wasn't sure, so I grew a beard and settled down in Cross Flats to watch.

"I had a notion you were on the same trail, but I knew you wouldn't trust me. Right after you rode out this morning, a freighter pulled in with Breckmill. Dead. Riddled with rifle shots. Picked him up on the malpais. I figured then you might be headin' into a trap, so I tagged along."

Ken nodded. "We can talk later, Hawley. Right now we've got to catch Shate before he gets back on the reservation. Those Apaches have rested horses somewhere in the canyon. Let's take a look."

WHILE Ken hurriedly dressed, Hawley smashed the three Apache rifles against a rock in order to insure their uselessness in the event the escaped Indian circled back while they were searching the canyon for the trio's horses.

Holding their six-shooters ready for instant use, the two of them set off in opposite directions.

Hawley came pounding up as Ken started from the clearing, leading two of the Apache ponies.

Locating their own spent horses farther up the canyon, they saddled the rested Indian ponies and rode out at a smart gallop.

"We ought to catch him," Hawley observed. "Probably not in any hurry. Figures those Injuns have you roasted."

Ken nodded. "They would have, if you hadn't come along."

Leaving the canyon, they turned north toward an area of broken hills, steep and shale-littered on their south sides. Riding was rough and treacherous and they kept silent.

They stopped, resting the horses briefly, and went on. Just as they started up another high hill, Ken pulled his mount to a halt and squinted toward the top of the incline.

Just visible against the sun was a small almost motionless cloud of dust.

THEY reached the top of the hill, Ken in the lead, and stopped, squinting against the sun. Halfway up the opposite ridge, a single horseman picked his way among the rocks.

Ken drew his six-gun and fired once into the air.

As the shot echoed hollowly across the intervening gulch, the rider on the slope of the opposite ridge stopped his horse and stared over his shoulder. For a full half minute he studied the figures behind him. Then he dug in his spurs and started his horse scrambling frantically toward the top of the incline.

Ken glanced at Hawley. "I want him to know I'm after him," he said, starting down the hill.

The wiry little Apache mustangs were expert rock jumpers, and before Shate disappeared from view they had reached the gulch and were starting across.

They started up the next ridge at a run, zigzagging among the rocks. When they reached the top, Ken reined to a halt, studying the ground ahead.

Shate had slid down the other side and was heading at a dead run toward a brief stretch of level country beyond. As his horse pounded onto the flat, he took a quick look over his shoulder and saw the two riders outlined along the crest of the ridge.

Whipping out his gun, he fired six times toward the top of the ridge. Most of the slugs fell short, kicking up dust along the slope. One went high, whistling only inches over Ken's head.

"Emptied his gun," Hawley observed.

"We won't give him time to reload," Ken said grimly, starting down the ridge at a rush.

They pushed the ponies relentlessly now. Shate looked around again and was apparently seized with panic. He dug in his spurs savagely, in a desperate attempt to reach the broken rocky terrain just beyond the farther edge of the flat.

His horse managed one final burst of speed which brought him almost across the flat and then slackened its pace.

Ken's mustang reached the bottom of the ridge and started across the flat at a swift run.

Shate glanced frantically over his shoulder. Just as his horse reached the far end of the flat, he brought it to a sudden sliding halt, leaped from the saddle and ran for cover behind the boulders ahead.

Hawley cursed. "Watch out! He'll get a chance to load now!"

Ken motioned toward the right. "Circle in from the side. I'll go left. Take him alive if you can!"

DUCKING in among the rocks, he flattened himself against a massive boulder and edged forward. Shate, he knew, had the advantage. He could back himself into a well-protected niche among the rocks and make them come to him.

As he crept ahead the sudden crashing roar of a .45 froze him into immobility. A second shot followed a split second later and, tardily, a third.

He waited, but there was no call from Hawley.

Gauging his direction by the sound of the shots, he dodged forward, keeping to cover as much as possible. As he neared a small space among the rocks, the faint click of a pebble reached his ears.

Lying flat on the ground, he squirmed around a rock pile and took a quick look.

Hawley lay motionless in the middle of the little clearing and Shate was bending over him, fumbling frantically. Blood ran down the renegade's face; apparently Hawley had creased his scalp.

As Ken watched, momentarily puzzled, Shate ripped off the prone man's shirt, grabbed his hat, and half-crouching, ran toward the rocks.

And suddenly Ken understood his actions. After donning Hawley's shirt and hat, he would try to trick Ken into the open. It was a ruse which might have worked had not Ken luckily appeared on the scene in time.

As the renegade agent dashed for cover, Ken took careful aim and fired.

The renegade staggered on and Ken fired again. This time Shate buckled as a slug struck one of his legs. He dropped on his knees, threw himself flat, slued around and fired wildly.

Ken shoved his hat around the rock pile. It was a time-worn trick but it worked again. Shate fired at it twice. Ken counted. Assuming Hawley had fired only one of the three previous shots, that made five. One left, unless Shate got a chance to reload.

Balancing himself carefully, he suddenly stood up straight, fired over the top of the rock pile and ducked back.

Shate fired wildly again, his bullet smashing harmlessly against the boulders beyond. Six.

Edging straight back from the rock pile, Ken inched around a rise a few yards in the rear, crept along behind it a few feet and cautiously peered out.

SHATE lay sprawled across the clearing, desperately attempting to reload.

Resting his gun along the top of the rise, Ken took a long steady aim and pulled the trigger. Shate's six-gun jumped out of his hands.

Ken climbed over the rise, ran across the clearing, booted the gun out of sight among the rocks and returned to the prostrate form of Hawley. A quick glance convinced him that the owlhoot was beyond help. Shate's two bullets had caught him squarely.

The renegade sprawled nearby, watching warily, a look of murderous hatred in his tawny eyes.

Ken motioned toward him with his six-gun. "Get up."

Shate stared at him. "I can't, Leslie. I'm hit."

Ken shrugged. "Stand up, or I'll kill you now."

Wincing with pain, the agent struggled to his feet.

"Walk toward the flat," Ken ordered.

Shate hesitated and a look of panic came into his eyes. "I can't walk, Leslie! I'll bleed to death. Give me a chance!"

*He didn't give her any chance,* Ken thought.

He spoke again. "Either walk or I'll finish you now."

White-faced, the agent began limping across the clearing. Ken followed, herding him through the rocks to the flat.

One of the Apache ponies lingered nearby and he caught it. Shate watched, a faint look of hope creeping into the eyes.

Ken mounted the horse himself, motioning the bewildered renegade ahead of him.

Shate began to weaken visibly. Halfway across the flat he stumbled and went down on his knees.

Ken walked the horse behind him and bent down. "Get up. Keep on walking till I tell you to stop."

Groaning, the agent stood up and staggered on. Ken stopped him just short of the base of the ridge.

"Got anything to say, Shate?"

The renegade stared at him, stark terror in his eyes. "Give me a chance, Leslie! Get me a horse! I can't last!"

Ken looked at him impassively. "That's right. You can't last." He motioned toward the ridge. "Start climbing."

Shate's voice broke. He became hysterical. "I can't climb, Leslie! I can't climb. I can't. I can't . . ."

Ken sat unmoved. "Crawl then," he said.

Ken lifted his gun. "Climb, or I'll kill you."

Whimpering, the renegade lurched toward the ridge and started to climb, torturously, inches at a time.

Ken watched. *That's easier than the way she died,* he thought.

He waited until Shate was two-thirds of the way up, meanwhile filling the emptied cylinders of his gun with five new cartridges.

He called out then. "That other Apache horse might be just over the hill, Shate. If you could make it over the top, you might get away."

*That's the way it was with her,* he thought. *She must have gone on hoping when there wasn't any hope.*

Appearing not to hear him, Shate inched his way upward. Suddenly, however, he crouched, sprang forward and made a rush for the top of the ridge.

Ken lifted his gun, framed the back of his shirt with the sight and fired.

Shate spun crazily, lost his footing, lurched backward, and bouncing from rock to rock, rolled all the way down the slope.

HE tumbled to a stop at the bottom in a shower of shale and dust. Walking his horse a few feet, Ken bent down and fired five more slugs into the motionless form.

After he had rounded up the other horses, he secured Hawley's body to the back of one of them and set out across the ridges toward Cross Flats. He was weary as he had never been before in his life. Every inch of his body felt bruised and beaten. Curiously enough, his mind seemed empty of thoughts.

He was aware only that one part of his life had come to an end, that now there could be no turning back, no dwelling in the past. There was not even revenge to keep him there.

Connie Weatherby could not be forgotten, any more than his father or mother could be forgotten, or his childhood, but he suddenly understood that no matter how indelibly she was etched on his past, she could not be projected into his future.

As he crossed the last ridge just at dusk and came down on the tableland west of Cross Flats, he realized with a slight shock that he was no longer thinking of her, but of the dark-haired hotel girl, Crista Benton.

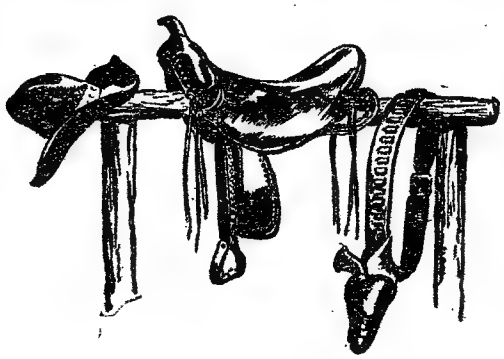
# COLD TRAIL TO DEATH

By D. B. NEWTON

**The killer wouldn't have been missing—if Bill Harder hadn't known that the only clue to his identity was missing too. . . .**

STARTING at wrists and ankles, the cold ran in long shudders clear through Bill Harder's body. It must have been that which wakened him, for there was no sound in the cabin other than the rasp of his own breathing. He lay there for a long moment, struggling with a vague impression of something wrong.

It was full daylight. Suddenly he thought: *I'm alone!* But where was Sam Cullen? He raised up in the bunk and looked quickly around, saw his own breath hanging in a cold mist in front of him.



At the same moment excruciating pain throbbed like the pounding of a hammer inside his head. Gasping, he reached with fumbling fingers, located the spot buried in the hair about his right temple. There was a lump, and a slight stickiness of blood. Harder winced as he touched it. Somebody had slugged him while he lay asleep.

No mystery about it! Sam Cullen's suspicions had been aroused last night—maybe he'd even guessed that Harder was on his trail. Having slugged him, Cullen would be miles away by now. For the sun was high, and the deadly chill of the cabin showed the monkey stove's well-banked fire had gone out hours ago.

Harder's skull felt like splitting as he flung away the covers and put his legs over the side of the bunk. It was an effort pulling on icy boots; when he stood he had to clutch for support at the edge of Cullen's bunk, which was just above his own, and wait that way for the worst of the pain and dizziness to go. Then he got his eyes open again—and they riveted in horror on what he saw in the upper bunk!

Cullen hadn't run off. He lay in his own blood, and there was blood congealed across the front of his shirt where repeated jabs of a knife had turned his chest into a mass of wounds. The eyes were closed. Obviously he had died in his sleep without knowing what hit him.

After the first incredulous shock, Harder noticed the odds and ends of junk strewn across Cullen's body. The murderer had gone through the dead man's warbag. "First, he socked me," Harder decided. "That gave time for finishing off Cullen and making his search. Wonder what he was after?"

In the scatter, there was nothing of interest except a few dollars in greenbacks. That proved the motive hadn't been robbery. Harder turned away baffled. His head felt better now; but cold still cut to the bone. He went to the stove, opened the door to thurst in wood, and stopped at sight of something in the ashes of the fire bowl.

He fished and got it out—half of a photograph, a mere snapshot torn across the middle. Originally it showed Cullen and another man grinning into the camera, arms about each other's shoulders. Now only Cullen's face was left; of the

other, one lean arm and hand could be seen dangling loosely around the neck of the murdered man.

It was beginning to make sense now. Harder muttered: "The killer wanted the other half of that picture—evidence that he and Cullen knew each other. He tore off part and took it with him, and left this in the stove to burn. Looks like the trail is getting warmer!"

A fire built, he set moodily about throwing together a hurried breakfast.

MIKE HARDER, stage line detective, was trying to find a link to connect the dead Cullen with last month's spectacular one-man robbery of the Banville coach. The company felt sure that Cullen, who handled the ribbons on that run, had been the leak for information that a special shipment of several thousand dollars in cash, property of the Century Mining Corporation, was in the boot. But unable to prove anything against him, and as a last resort, they had fired Cullen and set Harder on his trail thinking the suspected driver would go somewhere to meet his stickup pal for a split of the loot.

Just the day before, Harder had finally overtaken his man—when a sudden storm coming up drove them both into the same abandoned cabin for shelter. That had been a touchy situation, with Harder wondering every minute whether Cullen would guess who he was, and what he was doing there.

And now Cullen lay dead, at the hands of someone who had come and gone in the silence of the night. . . .

Coffee pot in hand, Harder stepped to the door, threw it open on a world covered with a new fall of snow. The storm was long over. First thing his eyes lit on was a double line of boot tracks leading across the flats between the door of this cabin, and a fringe of trees at the lower end of the mountain park. There could hardly be a plainer trail.

Grim satisfaction was in Harder, as he calmly scooped up a potful of snow for coffee, took it back inside. He didn't hurry too much with his breakfast. The murderer was miles away by now, but those tracks would still be there.

He left Cullen's body where it was, latching the cabin door securely against the wolves. There was a crystal quality to the winter morning. Harder's own bronc had gone lame on him yesterday. He let it stay in the shed behind the cabin and forked Sam Cullen's gray gelding instead.

In a stand of spruce below the park, he found where the killer had tied up and, after the job was done, had hit saddle again and ridden directly back the way he came. The trail was childishly simple to follow. Harder rode beside it down through pine and mountain parks, toward the flatlands below; while overhead the clouds parted in a broad rift of icy blue across the center of the sky.

Along toward midmorning, the tracks led him at last into the main street of a mining town among the hills, and there he lost it in the scuffled slush of the thoroughfare. Harder pulled up his mount and looked about at the gray frame buildings, thinking likely one of them harbored the killer. And unless he was mistaken, that killer was the stage stickup he had been ordered to find.

A score or so of cracker-box structures lined the street. An occasional miner clumped the sidewalks; from black mouths of workings pitting the mountain face above town there rolled at times a distant thunder, telling of dynamite at work within the depths of rock. This was Nugget, said a sign. Suddenly Harder recalled that Nugget held the central offices of the Century Mining Corporation.

There was a livery barn at the near end of the crooked street and he rode in there. He had to wait minutes before a skinny-looking barnman came to take his pony, yawning sleepily and scratching at the back of his neck. "Morning," said Harder.

The other nodded and started stripping saddle and bridle off the horse.

"How's business?" Harder tried to make his tone casual, as he angled for

information. "Pretty slow on a day like this?"

"Yeah. You're the first customer this morning. I notice the pony Tom Bent hired last night is back in its stall—must have brang it in before I come to work."

"Tom Bent? He's head of Century Mines, isn't he?" Harder frowned, added: "Does he ride often at night?"

"He sure don't."

Harder was silent a moment, a bizarre idea building in the back of his head. A very ugly speculation. He said, finally: "Where would I find Bent, now? I got business."

The barman scratched a lantern jaw with a hand that had a finger missing. "Unless he's in his office, I wouldn't know."

"Thanks." Harder tossed a dollar that the other caught with his maimed hand, and then strode away from the livery barn.

THE Century Mining Corporation's office was on a second story halfway down the block, at the head of dark and creaking stairs. On the door, under the name of the company, were the words: "Thomas Bent, President." A dark, thick-featured man glanced up irritably from his desk as Harder walked in without knocking. "Mr. Bent?"

"That's me."

"Mike Harder—I'm with the Maland Stage Lines."

At once, Bent's dour look was washed away by one of quick affability. He rose with hand extended. "Ah, yes! Then you people have decided to make good on that lost shipment? Fine—fine! A chair, Mr. Harder? Cigar? You know of course, I dislike being difficult to deal with, but your company insured the money and was responsible for the hold-up. In that case—"

"Just a minute!" Harder interrupted. "I'm not here to talk insurance. I'm a special agent—a detective."

"Oh." Bent's manner changed again, and he shrugged. He had lost all his friendliness. "I jumped to conclusions. Well, have a chair anyway. And what's on your mind?"

He reseated himself, but the other remained standing. Harder said, bluntly, "Sam Cullen's dead."

"Who?" Bent frowned, as though puzzled.

"Cullen—the driver on the Banville stage. He's lyin' in a cabin a few miles from here, up in the flats. Stiff as a board—murdered during the night."

"No!"

Harder made a face. "Come on, Bent! Let's talk turkey! The man who killed Sam Cullen was the one that worked the Banville holdup, with his help. This insurance you were babbling about fits right into the picture—a simple way for you to double your money, at the stage company's expense. Then, if Sam Cullen tries to get a little blackmail, just stab him in his sleep and be rid of him—"

Bent was on his feet, shaking with wrath. "Have you the gall to—?"

"Okay." Harder shrugged. "But I happen to know you were riding last night. And who else was it I trailed from Cullen's body right into this town—practically up here to your office?"

"Get out!" shouted Bent. "I'll sue you and your company for slander! I never went riding last night. I never murdered your damn Cullen, or whatever his name was. I don't know who robbed that stage, either—although I've got an idea!"

Harder's lips twisted in an unbelieving smile. "Yeah?"

"I figure it was a lunatic named Kells, who's had it in for my company and me ever since I bought worthless property off him cheap and developed gold on it. He's threatened to kill me for that. It would have been just like him to try to hit us by stealing our money, not thinking about it being insured."

"Well, it's a good story." Harder shrugged. "Maybe so, though, I can prove right now whether you did Cullen in or not." He reached into his pocket, brought out the torn fragment of photograph and tossed it on the desk. "If you've got the other half of this on you,

I'll have you sewed up ten ways to Christmas!"

Cold fury in his eyes, fists tight, Bent gritted: "You think I'd let you search me—?"

Casually, Harder put one hand on the butt of his holstered gun. A cold draft touched the back of his neck just then, lightly—it might have been the office door opening a crack. He paid it no attention. "If you'll step around where I can get at your pockets and keep your hands high—"

His voice broke off in mid-sentence as his glance, dropping for a moment to the picture on the desk, froze there. "Hold on a minute!" He snatched up that torn piece of cardboard, staring at it more closely. The hand and arm flung about Cullen's shoulder— No, it wasn't just the way the hand curled loosely there—

He could see now, plainly, what had escaped him before: *There was a finger missing!*

"I owe you an apology, Bent!" But as he glanced up again the other was staring past him, toward the door at Harder's back; and there was panic in the widened eyes. The lips moved soundlessly before Bent could gasp: "Kells! *Don't!*"

Harder, remembering the cold draft he had felt, spun just as a revolver thundered. He saw Kells in a crouch with smoke drifting from a naked gun; knew him at once, of course—the lean, stringy form of the man at the livery stable. His eyes shone now with a fierce light of fanatic hatred, crazed and dangerous.

Bent coughed on the bullet and sagged heavily to his knees, and Kells' six-gun swung toward the stage-line detective. Harder was going for his own weapon, dragging it out as Kells' gun boomed a second time. Lead pounded high into Harder's shoulder, drove him back against the desk. Then his six-shooter bucked once. And the killer crumpled, gun thudding to the floor.

TOM BENT was not too badly hurt, but Kells had only a few moments' gasping life left him. He lay against the wall, eyes holding the glare of a wounded snake as Harder came toward him favoring his hurt shoulder. The maimed right hand wavered upwards, as with a great effort and the last of his strength. At the last moment Harder realized what the man was up to and he struck the hand away just as it was sliding back behind the sagging head.

In a sheath between his shoulder blades Harder found a wicked looking knife, still red with the blood of Cullen. Suddenly, in a quick horror, he recalled the way Kells had come toward him through the dark of the barn that morning, lazily scratching the back of his neck . . . waiting for a suspicious move from Harder, with the knife ready to streak silver light across the gloom—

Harder tossed the blade away, with a shudder.

"You're goin' out, Kells," Harder said. "Why not make a clean breast of it? You killed Sam Cullen for his share of the Banville loot, when he came here to Nugget where you were waiting for a chance at Bent. You were hiding in the stable this morning when I rode in; you either recognized me, or Cullen's pony, and got the idea of posing as a barnman and siccin' me onto Bent. . . . Have I got it figured about right?"

Kells' mouth twisted harshly. "Pretty smart, ain't you?" he muttered in a whisper that brought blood to his lips.

"Where's the money?" Harder demanded. "The Banville loot?"

Kells only shook his head. The wild eyes were glazing, rolling upward beneath heavy lids. Harder shook him. "You can't use it, Kells! Why not die clean?"

The man coughed weakly, a bubbling cough; he fumbled for his throat with the maimed right hand. Then, so weak Harder could barely make out the words, he whispered: "All right, damn you! It's at the livery barn—buried in the loft—under the hay!"

Harder let him down and rose slowly to his feet. Men brought by the sound of gunfire were yelling outside and already thundering up the stairs.

The knife struck home, drawing a grunt from the marshal!

# Trial by SIXGUN

By RAY TOWNSEND

LARS MORGAN had been looking for Chet Yoder and Joe Lind, but he hadn't expected to find them so soon—nor so easily. A man wasn't framed for bank robbery every day. But when he was—and could get away—he didn't figure to find the men who had framed him waiting openly on the street in broad daylight.

But as he drew rein at the head of the street, Lars saw, suddenly, that the men were not waiting for him. Chet Yoder, squat, heavy-bodied, stood spraddle-legged in the dust a block further down. Joe Lind's lithe form stood thirty feet beyond, nearer the walk. Both men faced the swinging doors of a saloon and as Lars watched, a lone man came through the doors, facing the street.

The man paused and in that instant the street's emptiness and the cross-fire position of the two men had made a pattern in Lars Morgan's mind. And as his glance touched the man in the doorway, recognition was suddenly there: the un-

**A posse's guns had mowed down his father because Old Red Morgan had hit the owlhoot—now law lead would grave-send young Lars because he'd gone straight!**

even slope of shoulder, the gaunt angularity of frame, the quick upthrust motion of chin as the man became aware of his position. So Marshal Tom Porter had beaten him to Burnt River after all!

But even as Lars rowelled forward he knew it was too late. Sunlight flashed on raising guns and sound exploded in the waiting silence. The man before the saloon fell, clutching useless hands to his body.

And for a moment, as he rode up, uselessness was also a thing inside Lars Morgan. He knew these men too well, knew that this killing was but a small part of the scheme of their lives. They turned, guns still in hand, squinting across the harsh sunlight.

In that moment it was in Lars to have done. The weight of forty-five was heavy beneath his armpit, under the black covering of his broadcloth coat. Now, to feel the jolting recoil of death within the pressure of his own hand. . . . But hesitation was there, as it had always been, giving Chet Yoder the first move, running bitterness deep inside Lars Morgan.

"Well, well." Yoder's voice was a coarse loudness against the silence of the street. "Look who's showed up, Joe. The right honorable Mister Morgan, junior. How're yuh, kid?"

Lars felt the man's contempt, hearing Joe Lind's quick laugh. Men moved out upon the street, focusing toward the saloon and the man's dead body upon the walk. Yoder and Lind holstered their guns, ignoring the townsmen.

"Figgered you might trail out, after that little tight we left you in down Benuta way, kid," Yoder said.

"If I could get out, you mean." Lars forced casualness into his tone. "After the way you hombres framed me."

Suspicion and distrust twisted a frown on Joe Lind's dark face. "Don't like the kid cuttin' our trail this way, Chet!"

"Hell, don't be so chouncey, Joe. The kid here's on our side o' the fence now." Yoder's laugh came belly-deep, but his eyes lay narrow in the harsh flatness of his face. "Ain't that right, kid?"

There was but one answer, Lars knew. But what had he expected? He had followed these men deliberately, had planned. . . . He nodded briefly, swinging to the dust before the saloon.

A fat, middle-aged man detached himself from the crowd. Lars caught the gleam of silver upon his shirt-front, felt the lawman's mild glance cross his face. "Three of yuh's playin' it purty safe, don't yuh think, Yoder?" the man said.

"Don't know what yuh're talking about, sheriff." Yoder's voice hardened. "Joe and the kid here just happened along. Plain case o' self-defense. How about it, boys?"

Lars' glance crossed to the body upon the walk. For a brief moment there was a feeling of goodness. Goodness, in that Marshal Tom Porter had, after all, believed his story about the robbery in Benuta. He had believed—and had acted in the only fashion he knew. Now it was up to Lars.

"Sure." Lars Morgan spoke over the sickness that moved in his stomach. "Plain case of self-defense."

CHET YODER poured whiskey as though bestowing favor upon his inferiors. "Drink up, kid. She's a long way up-trail from Benuta." He took his liquor in a single gulp, squinting across at Lars as he leaned against the bar. "Joe, here, he don't convince so easy, kid. Never could figger why. Me, I don't give a hang one way or the other. But Joe, he's always gotta know things. Things like—well, maybe like what Red Morgan's kid brother's doin' trailin' into Burnt River when we left him nice and tight down below the line just three days back."

Lars Morgan tried a grin as he lifted his glass, surprised that it worked. The deadliness of the bull-necked man and his half-breed partner was strong within him and he fought the familiar hollowness of his stomach, hating it and yet not escaping. And the mention of Red. . . .

"I kind of figured you boys a little smarter than that." He watched Yoder's expression, running his words in ahead of the man. "Part of it wasn't bad—sapping me kind of gentle-like and tying me loose enough so I could break free

just in time for the marshal to show. But you overlooked this one card.

"I been working in the Benuta bank for old man Nugent over two years, Yoder. You think I like standing behind that chicken wire, handling all that dinero day after day—and me winding up with a lousy sixty bucks at the end of the month? Hell, you run around with Red long enough to know that a brother of his could figure better than that!"

Lars reached for the bottle, feeling the sharpness of their eyes as he poured.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Yoder's hand jarred abruptly against Lars' back. "Just a chip off the old block, eh? Hell, me and Joe thought Red's kid brother was just a prissy kind of . . . No offense, kid, but from what Red used to tell us, and them go-to-meetin' clothes. . . ."

"Yeah. The way you boys worked it, you're lucky you got what you did. If you and Joe had took more time and figured me in on your plans we'd have made a killing instead of you having to vamoose with nothing but the loose paper in the drawers."

"Don't like the sound o' this, Chet." Lars caught the blackness of Joe Lind's glance. "The kid here ain't. . . ."

"You talk too much, Joe. Told you that before." Yoder's voice tightened against the breed, but he grinned, without taking his eyes from Morgan's face. "Come on, kid, give us the low-down."

Lars drank. It was this easy, then. During all the hours on the trail from Benuta it had been this moment that had worried him most. This moment, when the whole of his plan would depend upon Chet Yoder's interest, his belief. He had counted upon the man's greed and overwhelming self-confidence and now, seeing the eagerness that sparked beneath Yoder's heavy brows, he knew that—at least for the moment—he had won.

He talked, then, quickly and without interruption, rejecting the thoughts of the dead man outside and the accusation he had faced in Benuta after the robbery. He told Yoder of the bi-annual audit that was due at the end of the week, that the old banker was sure to need his help. They would work at night. The safe—the new safe, to which only the banker himself held the combination—would be open. Carefully he set the night and exact time when he would expect them.

"How about that deputy?" Joe Lind's voice threatened. "Don't like this, Chet."

"What do you think I'm cutting you boys in on this for?" Lars laughed. "Hell you got to do something for your money!"

"Yeah." Yoder ignored Lind's words, his eyes gleaming. "Twenty thousand! This is it, kid!"

THIS is it, all right, Lars thought grimly. But maybe a somewhat different "it" than the big man suspected. "Think I'll get a little shut-eye 'fore I trail out," he said, but as he pushed through the swinging doors, he paused suddenly. The local undertaker, a short, gaunt man, and his two helpers were there, loading Marshal Tom Porter's body aboard a flat-bedded rig.

"Few things in his pockets, here," the little man croaked. "And the guns. Reckon you gents'd know where they belonged?"

Lars felt the intensity of Yoder's glance upon his back as the two men came out behind him. He stepped across, gazing down upon the drawn, familiar features of the dead man. "Never seen the ranny before," he said abruptly. He heard Chet Yoder's coarse chuckle as he stepped into the saddle and kneed the gelding toward the livery shed further along the street.

"Never seen the ranny before." Lars Morgan twisted upon the hotel room bed, the fatigue of three days in the saddle insufficient against the irresistible move of thought. No, not before he was a year old! He cursed bitterly, without words, seeing again his own hesitation in the moment that Tom Porter had died.

Tom Porter, liveryman and, later, marshal of Benuta, had been almost a second father to the young Morgan boy. It had been Tom who had talked old man Nugent into taking Lars into his home, teaching the boy the banking business, after Mrs. Morgan had died and the

older Red Morgan lit out on the owlhoot trail. It had Tom who had believed in him against the town's conviction of bad Morgan blood. Like father and older brother, they had said. But Tom had encouraged him, understanding the feelings the hesitation, doubt and fears that had been the result of a town's ridicule and distrust upon the sensitive nature of a growing boy. And when the story of Red had come back down the trail—of how he had died beneath a posse's guns, deserted by his partners' needs for extra mounts—it had been Tom who had helped him face down the town's renewed predictions.

And then, as though purposely to fulfill these very predictions, had come Yoder and Lind, the pair who had left Red Morgan stranded, and their robbery of the bank and the circumstances that had pointed to Lars. And yet again it had been Tom, only Tom Porter who had believed.

In spite of fatigue, sleep would not come. Lars came off the bed, thrusting into the black suit, buckling on the shoulder holster. He crossed to the stable and rode out of town without seeing Yoder or Lind. Remembering the greedy eagerness of Chet Yoder's look, there was no doubt in him concerning the outlaw's appearance in Benuta at the appointed time.

Benuta. Thoughts of the town followed him south, into the lifting Sweetwaters as the sun dipped away, dropping the low country into purple shade. The bank's depositors had demanded that charges be preferred against Lars and old Amos Nugent had put up bail only at the insistence of the marshal himself. Lars had not counted on Porter's taking trail himself and now, without him. . . .

HE dropped out of the high country, seeing the lights of Benuta flicker up against the growing dusk. Six days since he had taken trail north. Suddenly, as he watched the town form against the night below, futility was there, a surging feel of uselessness, and the blackening distance of the hills beyond offered freedom and release from all the petty tyrannies, the accusation and distrust that waited in the town.

But even as he hesitated, the feeling was gone. "A man can't live alone, boy," Tom Porter had said. "And what you make of your life will be a picture in other men's eyes. The shape of that picture is up to you." And Helen Nugent was there. Old Amos' daughter, with her blackness of hair and dark laughing eyes that had grown to mean promise. He went into the town and the mountain's night gave way to the play of light and the movement of men in the street.

As he turned in at the livery stable, a man's dim figure moved up from the stalls and the bearded features of little Charley White were there at his knee, his voice coming anxious and rasping in the half-light.

"Glad I caught ye first off, boy. I ain't sayin' ye done it, see? I don't reckon ye'd be side-winder enough to turn on old Tom after all he done fer ye, but. . . ."

"Whoa, hold up a minute, Charley," Lars cautioned the man. "What's this all about, anyway?"

"Listen, boy. Young Sullivan, the lad Tom was trainin' as deputy, got word on the telegraph that Tom was killed up in Burnt River three days ago. Yoder done it, he says, and accordin' to the story, you and Joe Lind backed the play!"

"Me and . . ." But words would not come. This was something he had not expected, had overlooked entirely.

"Go on, boy! I'll get the square of it later," the old man urged. "I'm sayin' I don't figger ye'd do it. But they's others and they're downright unhappy about the whole thing. They's been lynch talk, boy! Now skedaddle!"

Lars went through the stables, circling the back edges of the town, the roil of feeling within him working on the news, drawing again that empty hollowness in the pit of his stomach. The bulking shadow of Amos Nugent's big frame house—the only home he himself had known during past years—loomed blackly in the night. He left the gelding beyond the barn, crossing quickly to the

rear door, going in through deserted porch and kitchen.

Lamplight from the large living room invaded the hallway, outlining the small table at the far end, and the wide brimmed hat that lay upon it. Voices came out to Lars, freezing him against the wall below the stairs. A chair creaked and footsteps sounded.

"All right, Mr. Nugent. I don't guess he'd be fool enough to show up here again, but you never can tell. I knew his brother all my life and he did a lot of mighty loco things." Lars recognized the voice of Ray Sullivan, realizing suddenly that the man would now be marshal of Benuta.

"I don't care what you say, or what the town says, either!" Helen Nugent's voice ran unexpectedly chill along Lars' spine. "I know that Lars wouldn't. . . ."

"Now, girl," it was Amos Nugent, "that's enough for tonight. I'll see you in the morning, Ray. We'll see what can be done."

Lars eased back into the kitchen as they came out, hearing the front door close, waiting until the girl should have gone upstairs. But as he came into the hall again she was there, dark head tilted, one hand raised to the stair rail.

"Lars!" She came toward him, half running.

"Helen!" Amos Nugent was in the living room doorway, the wrinkled lines of his face thrown into a deeper relief by the lamp he held. "Go to your room!"

THE girl hesitated between the two men, and then left, Lars knowing she would, her footsteps making soft, quick sounds upon the carpeted stairway. Lars met the sharpness of his employer's glance as he moved into the big room, seeing anger there, and a self-righteous disdain. He remembered the look, recalling Amos Nugent's habit of holding himself above people.

"I saw Charley White, Mr. Nugent. I . . ."

"Lars." The banker raised a hand. "I took you into my home when your mother died. I never thought I would live to see this day."

But impatience flared up in Lars, and the wish to avoid the old man's habitual moralizing. "Mr. Nugent, I saw Tom die. It wasn't a good thing to see. It was Chet Yoder and Joe Lind. Tom didn't have a chance."

"Just so." The banker considered this with puckered lips, as though, it seemed to Lars, he was hearing news of some unsuccessful financial venture. "Your brother's friends. And now yours. I had hoped, Lars . . ."

"Mr. Nugent, I trailed those men north in the hope that I would be able to clear myself. To get them to come back to Benuta."

"I had hoped that for once, training and example might prove stronger than blood. But I see now that it's of no use."

"And I did it. They shot Tom, but they're coming back. And when they do, we can . . ."

"So, under the circumstances, I'm afraid there is but one course we can take."

It was no use, Lars saw. The old man wouldn't listen. All the urgency, the eagerness to tell the banker of his plan to capture Yoder and the breed evaporated suddenly. But what plan? It came to him then, as he studied the old man's face, that there was, after all, no plan, no chance. If Tom Porter had lived and were still marshal. . . . If he could convince Nugent of his purpose in luring the men back. . . . If, a hundred ifs. Charley White's warning came to mind with its further uselessness and Lars turned suddenly from the room, going into the night with the threatening sound of Amos Nugent's protest coming behind.

He had crossed half the yard's width when a figure detached itself from the blacker shadow of oak, ahead. The feel of gunbutt was in his hand before recognition, relaxing as her voice sounded.

"Oh, Lars, Lars!" She came up against him and he stood there, holding her, awkwardly, feeling the softness of her

through his coat. "You've got to get away! Now! Tonight!"

"But, Helen, I can't. . . ."

"You don't know what they're saying —what they mean to do! And Ray Sullivan! He's marshal now and he. . . ."

"Please, Helen."

"Go, please go, and never come back!"

She was gone then, running toward the house, a bare shadow in the blackness of night.

As he picked up the gelding beyond the barn, for a single moment, Red Morgan's face was there before him as it had been in the years before his mother's death: twisted, defiant and hating a world that would not bend.

"Ray Sullivan. He's marshal now. . . ." It had to be that way. There was nothing else. Lars remembered the older Sullivan boy from the time when he had played about the streets of Benuta: about Red's age, not a bully, but strong and sure. Young Lars had gone in awe of the older boy, silent in his presence, without comfort. The strength of Tom Porter without the warmth, the understanding.

There was a light in the small office fronting the 'dobe jail. Lars waited until the three men passed on, turning into Jim Nolan's saloon, beyond. Ray Sullivan looked up from his desk, the square lines of his face hardening. He moved abruptly, and as Lars closed the door and came into the room, he was facing the hollow muzzle of the marshal's gun.

"I want no tricks from you, kid."

His guts had been tight, outside the door, there, figuring. But now, watching the coldness of Sullivan's eyes, he was suddenly lax, without reason. He had made a mistake. The steel-grey eyes in Ray Sullivan's face told him that. There was no use, absolutely no use. He felt the thinness of a smile upon his own face, knowing that the man before him would understand even less than Amos Nugent. Sure he was lax. Why in hell wouldn't he be? It was all over but the shouting—or the hanging.

HE heard it first as from a distance, standing there in the little two-by-four cell. Shouting. Morgan, it said. His own name from the throats of men—and threats, and curses. Out front and further down the street and coming closer. The mob gathered and swelled and surged upon the jail. Lars Morgan sat. His mouth was dry. He had seen it happen to other men. He stood again, peering from the small window, and moved again to the bench.

He heard the jangle of keys in the hallway. Through the open-barred door he saw Ray Sullivan release the other two prisoners. "All right, boys," he heard the man say. "Out the back." The two men went by, shuffling, evidently sodden with whiskey. But before the door slammed shut, Charley White's high voice was there, demanding entrance.

"What're you doin' here, you old coyote?" Sullivan demanded.

"Reckon ye're gonna need some help, son," Charley croaked. Lars watched the old-timer slip through as the marshal locked the door. "Ye hear what the boy had t'say?"

The two men stood before Lars' cell and Sullivan's glance came through the bars, bleak and piercing. "The judge can waste his time listening to a Morgan, Charley. Not me."

Sound reached tumult at the front of the building and Sullivan strode away, purposefully. White hesitated, casting his watery glance in at Lars. "Looks bad, boy, mighty bad. Young Sullivan ain't much on savvy, but what he don't do with that mob out there, you can bet can't be done." He sent a quick look along the hall, fumbling beneath the shapeless coat he wore. "This's just in case boy," he mumbled. "Just in case."

And the dully gleaming weight of a pistol was there, through the bars, in Lars Morgan's hand. He stood holding the weapon as the old man went away.

Lars heard the sudden uprush of noise and then, as quickly, the drop-off to silence. Ray Sullivan's voice came, unintelligible in the cell, and he knew the marshal was talking to the mob. Men's

voices raised, here and there, died out. And then came a general outburst of protest, cut off abruptly by the sharp report of gunshot.

"Sorry, Bill." Lars could make out the words against dead silence. "That one won't kill you, but the next one will! And it's the same for the rest of you men! Now scatter! I'm marshal here."

THE mob broke, then, and the voices that came were hushed and the sound of booted feet went away, slowly, over the walks and sun-baked earth.

"Well, boy, we done 'er!" Charley White's eyes crinkled above his beard. "They skeddadled off like a covey of quail in a thunderstorm!"

He opened the door, hesitating suddenly, and as he turned Lars remembered the forty-five that lay holstered beneath his arm. But the old liveryman gasped suddenly as a hairy forearm slid out of nowhere, clamping tight against his windpipe. As Sullivan swung around a shadow moved beyond the door and light glinted on steel. The knife struck home, drawing a grunt from the marshal, checking his draw. He fell heavily against the bars opposite Morgan.

Chet Yoder's coarse laughter came as he dropped the unconscious oldster and stepped into the hall. "How're yuh, kid? Looks like it's a good thing fer you we showed up a mite early, eh?"

"Don't like this, Chet." Joe Lind moved in behind Yoder, pushing the door to. "Town's a hotbox. Let's git goin'."

"The keys." He motioned to Yoder.

The squat man bent, coming across to fumble at the lock on the cell door. "Figgered we'd mosey down and do a little checkin' on that bank job you was talkin' about, kid. Looks like you ain't exactly got things worked out yet, eh?"

Lars felt the ugliness in the man's tone as he stepped out of the cell. The knowledge came to him then that perhaps it was not too late, after all. That with half a chance . . . And the hollowness was there again, in his stomach, running its feel up into his throat, weakness behind his knees. Carefully he judged Joe Lind's position by the door, Yoder's stance to one side.

"What the devil did you expect?" His voice was surly with anger. "If you hombres had figured me in on that first holdup instead of pullin' it on your own hook, we might have got somewhere."

"Kid." Threat came up plainly in Yoder's voice. "Joe and me pulled that job like we're gonna pull this one tonight—alone. We got our belly full o' Morgans, savvy? You're the same as Red. No guts. Trouble. And you're goin' out the same as Red."

"I didn't think it was a posse, Chet. You and Joe gunned Red the same way you killed Tom Porter!"

The gun was in his hand then, and hesitation was a forgotten thing. He watched surprise grow and die within the pig eyes of the man before him, knowing, as the gun blasted flame and recoiled within his hand, that he had beaten Yoder's draw.

But at the door, Joe Lind had whirled with feline quickness, and as Morgan's glance came around the breed's gun exploded deafeningly within the hall. Lars spun with the impact, dropping to his knees, feeling the nearness of the man's second shot. He was firing from the floor, then, and the jail was a savage holocaust of flame and thunder and smoke, and he went down, seeing the boards of the floor rush up, unable longer to support the tremendous weight of gun and hand.

The cracks and watermarks along the plastered ceiling were the same. It was his own room—his room in the Nugent home. Lars turned, surprised for a second at the wincing pain along the right side of his chest. The door opened as he watched and the girl came across to the bed, her face lighting in a slow smile.

"Ray told us. He'll be all right in a week. Charley wasn't even hurt. Your two friends, though . . ." She shook her head in mock sadness. "And father, Lars. He's had to rearrange a lot of ideas, and you know how that hurts him. But he'll make it too, I guess. It will take all of you a little time to come around. But I think I can wait."

# WANTED: A HERO

## Just plain bowlegged cow-waddies weren't good enough for The Beautiful Girl From The East, they told Stub. She wanted A Hero . . . .

STUB wanted either to hide or to turn his horse and run. It was a heck of a note that he had to meet Nat Birdwell and Rush Thomas at this most particular time, when he'd screwed up his courage to the point of calling on THE GIRL. Probably they'd been calling on her, too. Ever since she had come from somewhere 'way back East to summer with the Gibbonses, Miss Ellinor Gates had not lacked admirers.

The two cowboys had turned their mounts sideways to block the road. Their freshly shaved faces grinned at Stub's obvious embarrassment. Nat, tall, with a hooked nose and flashing brown eyes, wasn't bad-looking—and knew it. Chunky, moon-faced Rush began to chuckle even before Stub reined in, and said, "'Lo, boys," as nonchalantly as though he was meeting them out on the range, instead of in the lane on the hill above the valley where SHE lived.

"Where to?" asked Rush, and Nat added significantly, "Darned if Stubbie ain't had him a haircut an' bought him a new hat! I b'lieve he's changed his shirt, too."

"Ye-ah, he has," Rush agreed with mock gravity. "And that vest ain't the same one we seen him wearin' last, with the cigaret burns an' gravy spots all down the front o' it. . . . Goin' some place in p'ticular, Stub?"

"I'm cuttin' 'cross Gibbons' ranch fer to see how them hosses on Rocky Flats is doin'," said Stub.

"Ye-ah?" chuckled Rush.

"Oh, ye-ah?" scoffed Nat.

"Wal, I am," said Stub, painfully and wrathfully aware that both his corded neck and snubby nose were crimson.

"Listen, rannie," said Nat. "I 'lowed I had a chance if any cowboy had. But SHE ain't int'rested in cowpunchers, not none. Ain't int'rested, 'cause she's got her a author on the string."

Rush nodded and stopped laughing. "This author wears towrist duds an' specs an' a straw lid, an' is the uppity!"

By STEPHEN PAYNE

"You buckaroosters is hoorawin' me," announced the bowlegged waddy. "I ain't scairt o' nobody in towrist duds named A. Arthur."

"A. Arthur!" squealed Rush, his heavy shoulders shaking.

"A. Arthur!" cackled Nat.

"Aw, chuckle and cackle an' squeal!" snorted Stub. "Darned if I see anything funny. . . . Get outa my way, boneheads."

"Boneheads? Us?" cried Rush. But Stub had crowded his horse between theirs and was spurring over the hill.

"To think that sawed-off waddy, homelier'n a mud fence, figgers he can get a stand in with Miss Ellinor when *I got turned down!*" snorted Nat.

"She hadn't no time to see me neither," returned Rush, suddenly gloomy. "Not with her author friend on the job . . ."

THE Gibbons' ranch buildings nestled under a hill in a narrow valley down which tumbled a sparkling mountain stream. Stub Elkins, riding into the yard, met old Ben Gibbons, milk pail on his arm, shuffling to the stable.

"What, another cowboy? Or are you maybe a author, Stub?"

Stub frowned and pulled his left ear. "What's this joke about Arthur, Gibbons?"

"Author, not Arthur," corrected the rancher, his weather-beaten face cracking in an expansive smile. "A feller what writes books, an' things."

"Huh? You ain't tryin' to throw the gaff into me? Does you mean a feller what writes the stuff you read in magazines you find in bunkhouses?"

"Prezactly," and Gibbons wagged his head. "We got a live one here. He says he's a—an author. Miz Ellinor's aunt—on the Gates' side the family—I'm Ellinor's uncle you know— Well, her aunt sent this snooty jigger here, writin' me to be doggoned nice to him. He's shore ridin' top hoss with the gal."

Stub's big blue eyes grew even wider. "You ain't stringin' me, Gibbons, like them cowpunchers tried to? She—she's sold on this dude?"

"Ain't I been tellin' you so, Stub? Not a chance for you, 'less—"

"'Less what? She never seen me close, but I shore has 'mired her from a distance."

"She don't really know you then?" Winking at a lazy cat crossing the yard, Ben Gibbons resumed. "Which is fine. 'Cause I was figgerin' you might convince her you was a—an author, too."

"Me?" Stub ejaculated. "But, shucks, I can't spell, nor hardly write my own name. How'd—?"

"Take off your spurs an' come with me," Gibbons interrupted. "We'll listen in on somethin'." Aside he whispered: "This is going to be plumb good—if I can put it over!"

Together they entered the kitchen of the cottage and tiptoed towards the living room. Through the half-open door floated voices.

"You say you made me the heroine of your new book, David? How dear of you!" The voice was sweet and girlish, and Stub thought he'd never listened to one quite so delightful.

"Yes, indeed, Ellinor." Stub at once hated the owner of this voice. It sounded top-lofty, smug. "I even used your real name. Here is the description of the heroine:

> "'She stood by the rose bush, quaffing the delicate aroma of the beautiful, beautiful flowers. Yet, sweet and delicate, fragrant and beautiful as they were, they were not sweeter nor more lively than the graceful girl bending over them. When she turned her face again to the young man watching her every move with that anxious caressing look of lovers, her cheeks were the color of the roses. Her eyes of azure blue—'"

"But they're brown," said Ellinor Gates, softly.

> "'—were like limpid pools seen by starlight; her lips parted in a smile disclosing—'"

Came a decided pause and the girl supplied crisply: "Teeth."

"No, no!" protested the author. "'Limpid pools seen by starlight.' . . . Don't you love that? Then to mention teeth! It grates on me."

"An' you shore grate on me, mister," thought Stub Elkins, plucking at Gibbons' sleeve. They gained the yard just in time to keep from being caught at their eavesdropping by Mrs. Gibbons and her two small daughters who had come in from picking gooseberries. Stub greeted them, and followed Gibbons to the stable.

"Now you see how to do it," stated the rancher, mopping his wrinkled face with his red bandana. "Jus' describe the gal you love."

"I ain't seen her close yet," said Stub. "She has got all her teeth, ain't she?"

"Huh? You're hopeless, Stub. Here I am tryin' to help you out with my niece,

a gal with plumb good sense, 'cept that she thinks them authors is—well, kinder up in the world. This Stanley David Featherstone, he's 'up' all right!"

"Stayin' here reg'lar?" asked Stub.

"Uh-huh. Said he was 'charmed with the place, so quaint,' and that he was after locoed color."

"There's lots o' that. Then loco patches is bloomin' like nobody's business. Red an' white an' purple, great gobs o' color. They're shore pretty."

"No doubt," said Gibbons drily. "Well, I got to milk. . . . But I'm still willin' to help you, Stub. S'posin' you get some dude clothes, hire a car in town, and come here all togged out swelligant an' with a leather hickey under yore arm to hold the writin' you do?"

"Would I get to see her? Talk to her?"

"Shore. But you'll want to remember yore lines."

"I won't be drivin' a team, Gibbons, so I won't need no lines. . . . By golly! I'll try it."

TWO hours later old man Gibbons sought Nat Birdwell and Rush Thomas at the Muleshoe Ranch where they worked, and explained the situation, concluding:

"Be on hand tomorrow evenin'. We're goin' to have more fun'n a box of monkeys."

However, Stub worked faster than Ben Gibbons had believed he would. At ten o'clock of the following forenoón, Gibbons himself was irrigating out of sight of his house. Mrs. Gibbons and her two small daughters were again out gathering gooseberries. Stanley David Featherstone had locked himself in his bedroom with orders that he was not to be disturbed, and Ellinor Gates, left to her own devices, was writing a letter:

"Dear Aunt Harriet:

This Featherstone's a washout, but since you asked me to be nice to him I suppose I must. I missed two invitations to ride horseback with interesting cowboys because he insisted upon reading passages of his dumb novel to me. Worse still, I've given folks the impression that —well, as they say out here, that he's riding close herd on me."

At this point Stub's borrowed flivver shivered into the yard and Ellinor saw, through the window, its driver, who wore a straw hat pulled over his ears and a store suit that had seen better days. When he stepped out and stood erect the girl couldn't help laughing.

From the back of the car the visitor produced a huge cowhide suitcase. Then he looked about questioningly and uncertainly, giving Ellinor an opportunity to see that he had nice eyes, a snubby nose, a wind-chapped face, and a wide, generous mouth made for smiling. But oh! how queer and out-of-place he looked on foot and in those clothes! He should have been a-top a horse, clad in boots, chaps, blue shirt, big hat.

Impulsively the girl hurried out to the car. "Good morning Mr. Gibbons is away. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Stub gazed at her all eyes. Gee whillikers! she was a darned sight prettier'n he'd even thought. Hair blacker'n and silkier'n a black hoss's mane, and she was trim and slender an' just the right height.

"I— Uh," he began bashful and confused. Then a thought hammered in his mind: "This your chance, Stub! No darned witnesses to see you make a fool of yourself or whatever."

"Why hey—yes, thar's—there's somethin' you can do for me," he said, words tumbling over one another. "You're Miss Ellinor Gates. Well I—I'm—I'm— Well, I'm—" What was that name he 'd figured out? He tried again, "I'm A. Arthur. I write things."

STUB opened the suitcase, thus exposing the clothing he usually wore, including boots, spurs, belt and six-shooter. As he pawed through these articles the girl's face registered the most puzzled expression imaginable. She asked quietly: "Is your name A. Arthur? Are those your clothes?"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean— No, ma'am. . . . Uh, I— Them is my duds. . . . Where's that dratted tablet?"

"How does it come you have this cowboy outfit?"

"Uh? I ride home, lookin' for locoed color."

"You mean local color? Mr. Featherstone said he was seeking color and atmosphere. He doesn't seem to have found much of either. Have you, Mr. —?"

"Doggone it, I can't find my tablet o' writin' paper." Stub straightened and looked at the girl. It seemed to him there was a mischievous twinkle in her large brown eyes. "Cost me two bits, that tablet did, an' I spent all night writin' words and chuckin 'em away till I got some as sounded good," he stated naively.

"Oh!" Ellinor Gates was beginning to enjoy this. "Perhaps you can remember what you wrote," she suggested.

"Uh-huh, I can. But somehow it seems now like 'twas jus' a lot o' tommy-rot an' didn't have no sense, though I sweat over it a-plenty. I'm feelin' darned silly in these clothes anyhow. Gibbons sed—I mean I heard you hadn't no use for cowpunchers. So I jus' tried for to— Shucks, I'll be goin' long."

"Don't go!" The girl smiled, thereby thrilling the bowlegged waddy to the tips of his toes. "I really like cowboys."

"You do! But Nat an' Rush sed—"

"I had to send them away because I was entertaining David Featherstone, and he's the sort that—" Ellinor paused.

"Where is he 'smornin'? He gone?"

"No. He's compos— He's working and isn't to be disturbed. . . . It's such a lovely day it seems a shame to waste it indoors."

"Shore is! Ever ride hossback, Miss Ellinor?"

"I love it, but David can't go."

"*We'll* go! Go to the Triangle J an' get hosses. Then I'll show you my ranch."

OLD MAN GIBBONS said to Nat Birdwell and Rush Thomas: "You cowboys hide yourselves under the livin' room winder. Twilight now, an' in a little bit that dumb Stud Elkins'll come along dressed up fer to play he's a author. I'll introduce him to Ellinor, an' this Featherstone geezer'll be right thar. 'Course Stub'll get the mitten and so'll Featherstone, which is what I'm after. This is goin' to be good!"

"Shore is," chuckled Rush.

'Reg'lar circus," approved Nat.

Forthwith Ben Gibbons strode into his living room, where he found Stanley David Featherstone.

The rancher cleared his throat loudly, "'Scuse me, Mister, but where-at's the girl?"

"Eh? You've broken my train of thought," returned Featherstone sharply. "It will take me fifteen minutes to concentrate again completely. By the way, where is Ellinor?"

"I was askin' you where-at she was."

"If I knew would I be asking you, Mr. Gibbons? I should like to see her. That line which has been eluding me is completed at last. It took the entire day to find the right word."

'Did, hey?"

"Two words to be exact. I was more than a little annoyed not to find Ellinor waiting when I came out of my room over an hour ago. *Over an hour ago*, mind you!"

'Uh-huh? I'm kinder 'noyed, too. You got any o' that locoed color yuh come to get yet?"

"Just what do you mean, Mr. Gibbons? Locoed color?"

"I dunno prezactly. 'Twas vore idea, not mine. . . . Here she comes. Where you been 'Linor?"

"I've been out," she said, replying to Gibbons.

STANLEY DAVID FEATHERSTONE turned languidly in his chair to glance around at Ellinor. "You did not wait for me to go with you," coldly. "Also it seems as if you might have been on hand to welcome me when I came out of my room, utterly exhausted. Exhausted! Yes, but I have found the right word! The descriptive passage is perfect. You see, the use of an adjective overcame the difficulty

rendering the rather ugly noun, 'teeth' beautiful. It now reads: 'Her lips parted in a smile disclosing PEARLY teeth.' "

"Listen!" cried the girl. "There's a car coming down the hill. See the funny man driving it."

"Stub Elkins," whispered Ben Gibbons to himself. "Stub, togged out in store clothes an' a straw hat! Whoop!" He ran out into the yard.

" 'Lo," called Stub, bringing the flivver to a shuddering halt.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Alexander Hudnut?" returned Gibbons loudly. "I has read a lot o' yore books and plays and—and things. Won't you come in?" He shook Stub's hand vigorously. Then whispered:

"Get one o' them leather cases an' somethin' wrote?"

"I got this," Stub hauled out the huge suitcase.

Gibbons' eyes popped. "Better and better!" He chuckled under his breath, and led Stub to the living room.

"Well, if his nibs, the author dude, leaves, too, it'll suit me all jake."

"Miss Ellinor Gates," old man Gibbons called importantly, "I'd like to introduce Mr. Alexander Hudnut, author and playwright. Ain't you a playwright?"

"Sometimes I play 'em right," said Stub. "How-do, Miss Gates?"

"How do you do, Mr. Hudnut. May I introduce you to my friend, Stanley David Featherstone?"

Featherstone had already risen and was blinking at Stub. "Hudnut, eh? What have you written, Hudnut? Off hand I can't—"

"What you wrote, Featherstone?" Stub cut in.

"Surely my name and reputation must be familiar to another author—if you are an author, Hudnut?"

"You bet-cha I'm a writer, Featherstone," said Stub. " 'Fact, my name's even better knowed'n yourn. Jus' you listen to this descriptive masterpiece writin' I has just did or done."

"I don't care to listen."

"David!" cried Ellinor, gently reproachful.

"You'll listen, won't you, Miss Gates?" Stub inquired.

"I'll be delighted."

"All right. Go ahead, Hudnut," growled Featherstone. "From the looks of your clothing you must be an eccentric sort of chap. I suppose your writing will reflect that eccentricity."

"Is he callin' me names, Ellinor?" asked Stub, and Gibbons whirled as if a bee had stung him. Stub calling the girl "Ellinor" already? "That 'lecentricity sounds fierce," Stub went on.

Outside the window the two listening cowpunchers doubled up with silent mirth. Stub fished an old envelope from an outside pocket of his oversize coat. "Pretty dark in here. But I know what I got writ—the description of the heroine."

Stub was reading:

"She was a standin' by the cactus bush sniffin' and sniffin' and sniffin' at the beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful thorns. But at that they wasn't no more beautiful than the Texas dogie sniffin' at 'em an' wishin' she could eat 'em. She turned her head an' her cow-like eyes, seen in the moonlight, was like pools. She curled up her upper lip, disclosin'—"

The cowboy paused.

"Teeth!" said Ellinor. "Pearly teeth! The use of the adjective—"

"Damn!" snorted Featherstone. "Damn!" and without another word he stalked to his room.

From Featherstone's room a brittle voice swelled out: "Gibbons, I'd like transportation to the city immediately. Immediately!"

"Shore, I'll fix you up some way, Featherstone. What you so huffy 'bout?"

There was no reply. Gibbons turned towards the girl and the cowboy: "Ellinor, ain't yuh kinda awful chummy with Stu—with Hudnut on short acacquaintance?"

"Oh, we've known each other a long, long time. Aren't you pleased with the way it's all come out, Uncle Ben?"

"Huh? Huh? Might as well say yes," said old man Gibbons.

# RAW-RED REUNION

**HE'D GONE TO PRISON FOR BUSHWHACKING ANOTHER MAN. HE'D COME BACK TO FIND OUT IF THE KILLER GUN WAS HIS . . .**

**By H. A. DeROSSO**

HE had left the gray, hot walls of the territorial prison behind him. Those mad, fear-filled hours of his escape he had forced far back into his memory to lie there with the remembrances of his three years of imprisonment, vagrant, dreaded memories that would come hauntingly back to him in his sleep.

He sat in the open door of the box car as the long freight clacked its way into the night. He sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the floor, relishing the rush of the cold night wind against his face and thinking how different this felt from the windless, stifling heat that was the constant atmosphere of the prison.

The desert lay white and vast in the darkness before him and sometimes a sudden spurt of the wind would blow a few particles of sand against his face and he would grin and remember how in his days of freedom he had so often cursed this wind and sand.

Now he noticed a subtle change in the landscape: a darkening of the sands that tokened the presence of vegetation. And a little farther on, sage and mesquite covered the ground and the whiteness of the desert was gone, leaving only a dark grayish expanse beneath him.

The train was slowing down. It was a matter of minutes before the locomotive would enter the yards of Vermada and he would be home. Home after three hell-filled years, but his home-coming would be no gala occasion. He must steal his way in like the sidewinders that glided noiselessly through the sand and sage.

There was no storm of emotion within him as he rose to his feet. Only that cold, maddening uncertainty that had plagued him these last three years. He had been sent to prison for the rest of his natural life for killing a man. Now he was coming home to attempt to discover if he *had* killed that man, for in the truth of his own mind he did not know.

Standing in the door of the box car, he watched the shuttling of the shadows beneath him. The wind whipped his clothes flappingly about him for they were several sizes too large but he had had little choice in their selection. Anything was better than the tell-tale gray prison garb he had hated so much.

He drew the sixshooter from its holster and held it tightly for he did not want to lose that as he dropped. He hit the gravel embankment with his shoulder and rolled a ways, coming to a stop in a clump of sagebrush.

The lights of the caboose winked past him as he rose to his knees, brushing sand from his clothing and thankful that no dirt had soiled his gun. He stood a while, staring at the lights of Vermada, a faint nostalgia threatening but never quite gripping him. Then he slipped quietly through the darkness.

In the three days of his new freedom he had acquired an excellent knowledge of the ways of stealth and now he put this wisdom to use. He knew his goal. The big, white house on the outskirts of

Vermada where he would most likely find Eileen Mulvaney. Only now she was Mrs. Eileen McFadden. Though he had not heard from her in all his imprisonment word had come to him through the prison grapevine of her marriage six months ago.

There had been a time in his past when he had dreamed of marrying her himself but his dreams had been only dreams and now he wanted a glimpse of her before pursuing his errand. He made his noiseless way to the lighted window which he knew opened into the library and he saw her.

She was alone, sitting in a big armchair reading. He saw the way the lamplight shone on her hair, turning it into an aura of red gold. And the long, slim fingers turning the pages and he wished suddenly that he could see her smile and hear her laugh and hold her close with the silk of her hair against his cheek.

THERE was an ache in his throat, an ache he had not known in three years, and he slipped away from the window and stole to the door, telling himself he was a fool and he should be about his business instead of entering this silent house. But he had been away from her for so long and his eyes stung and he could hardly wait.

Noiselessly he opened the library door and he was standing there, drinking in the sight of her, when she first became aware of him.

The book slipped from her fingers to the floor and all the color drained from her face. "Trace," she whispered. "Trace Moore."

He tried to smile reassuringly. He knew he was not a pleasant sight for his stay in prison had taken a good deal of flesh off him and brought a shining glitter to his eyes and grayed his hair. The pallor of his face was a far call from the sun and wind-burned complexion of his years of freedom. So he tried to smile and to speak but his throat was all dry and sore and the words would not come at first.

He could only look at her and read the shock and hurt in her eyes and all at once he wanted to explain what lay so heavily on his mind.

"I didn't kill him," Moore said hoarsely. "I didn't kill Roy Watrous. Anyway, I don't think I did. Good Lord, Eileen! I really don't know if I did. That's what I came back for. To find out."

She said nothing. She sat unmoving and the pain still lay in her eyes and so he tried again, hurriedly, the words tumbling one upon the other.

"I wouldn't kill Roy," he said. "Me and him were partners since we were kids. Sure, I took losing you to Roy real hard but not that hard to make me kill my best friend. You believe me, don't you, Eileen?"

"Trace," she whispered in a thick, quivering way. "Oh, Trace. I don't know what to believe any more."

He ran the tip of his tongue over dry lips and went on more slowly. "Me and Roy were pards in our ranch. Since you were going to marry him, we both knew we couldn't go on living in the same house and sharing the same ranch. So we went to Carson Rusk's place and began playing cards to see who should have all and stay and who should move on."

HER eyes had dropped to her hands, resting limply in her lap. All the life went out of his voice but he continued doggedly, bitterly.

"We were both hot under the collar and we'd both been drinking hard. I remember losing everything and signing over my share to Roy. Hell, I wanted to lose. I wanted to get away from here to where I'd never have to lay eyes on you and Roy together.

"Well, I signed my share of the ranch over to Roy and then I took another drink. I reckon I passed out, for I'm not a drinking man. Next thing I knew Carson Rusk is slapping me awake and asking what the devil I wanted to kill Roy for. And my gun was on the table, its barrel all bloody from bashing Roy's head in and Rusk says I done it. He says he saw me do it. And I don't remember a thing."

He was breathing heavily now and

though he was staring at her, he did not see her.

"I've had three years to think this all over and I've almost gone crazy. That's why I broke jail, Eileen. To come back here and find out if I really did kill Roy. If I did, then I'll go back willingly and take my medicine. But if I didn't kill Roy, I want to find the skunk who did and make him pay for what he done to Roy and to me. Those endless nights and Roy's face and those voices saying, 'You killed him. You killed him.' I know what hell really is, Eileen."

She spoke now, with a weary sob in her voice. "Why did you have to come back? I was just beginning to forget. Why did you come back?"

About to answer her, he sensed rather than heard the movement behind him and he whirled, hand slapping at his gun. But he never pulled it for he saw the black outline of the gun in the shadows and the pale hand holding it and so Moore's hands dropped limply to his side.

The gunman in the shadows moved forward with a whispering noise as of something dragging lightly over the floor and Moore recognized the halting, limping walk even before he recognized the face.

Eileen's voice came, hurt and sob-racked. "Oh, Rory, Rory."

Rory McFadden stopped. His gun was trained rock steady on Moore's middle. McFadden said quietly, "Hello, Trace. Long time no see."

Moore grinned mirthlessly. "Howdy, Rory. I didn't quite have the time to send out engraved invitations."

McFadden smiled slightly. He said, "You'd better leave us, Eileen."

She rose hesitantly, laying a hurt, troubled glance on Moore, then swept quickly out of the room. A stifled sob came drifting back to Moore's ears. He followed her with his eyes until the shadows swallowed her, then he said:

"Well, Rory?"

McFadden took his time answering. He hitched himself a little to one side, his clubfoot scraping whisperingly in the darkness and Moore's eyes narrowed. He kept his gaze fastened on the other's gun, remembering their old animosity that ran back to childhood days.

He and Roy Watrous, full of children's contemptuous cruelty, had dubbed this man "Clubfoot" Rory. Old man McFadden had been the town banker and young Moore and Watrous, sons of poor cowmen had felt it their duty to antagonize little Rory, the symbol of tight-fisted wealth.

Moore's mind flashed back over the years with kaleidoscopic completeness and all the bickering and quarrels and tears and grudging hate came back to him. And he remembered too how Rory had always wooed Eileen Mulvaney and how jealous and fearful he had been that Rory's wealth would take her away from him.

BUT it had been to Roy Watrous' flashing smile and full-hearted laughter that he'd lost her first . . .

McFadden's voice came as from a distance. "I heard you broke jail, Trace. Never thought you'd come back here though. With the border so close and handy, I thought sure you'd try for Mexico."

"I had good reason for coming back."

"Yes?"

"I ain't so sure I killed Roy Watrous. I want to find out the truth."

"So you still claim you're innocent," said McFadden.

"I never said I was! I always said I didn't know and I still say that. All I want to do is to find out the truth for the peace of my own mind so that I can live with myself again. It's hell to know that you've killed a man. It's worse than hell to know that you might have killed but you're not sure whether you did or didn't."

McFadden did not say anything right away. Moore could feel the other's eyes on him. At length McFadden said, "Can I trust you to listen to me?"

Caution tempered Moore's tones. "Come again."

McFadden laughed. "It's tiresome holding this gun on you all the time.

Will you stay put and listen if I put this thing away?"

Moore said, "What's your game, Rory?"

McFadden shrugged. "I've got a hunch you've been framed. I'd like to help you."

Moore smiled crookedly. "That sounds kind of funny coming from you."

"I reckon it does," McFadden said. "We never did get along any too well. I'll put it this way, Trace. If you were in my shoes and me in yours, and you had a feeling somebody was framing me, I reckon you'd be willing to help save me from rotting my life away in prison. I reckon you'd help, no matter how much you hated my guts."

Moore was silent. He did not quite know what to say. McFadden sounded earnest but his long dislike of the man cautioned Moore.

McFadden suddenly holstered his weapon. He said. "You can take me at my word—or the door is yours to use. I'll not stop you."

Moore's decision was made. He could use some help and he shouldn't be too choosy about its source. String along with Rory and see what he has to offer, he thought.

So he said, "All right, Rory . . ."

They talked over all the angles and came to one conclusion—Carson Rusk held the key to the mystery.

"It was his testimony that sent me to prison," Moore said slowly. "I've had plenty of time to figure out things and I reckon Rusk knows the answers. Maybe Roy passed out, too, like I did that night and Rusk came into the room and saw us like that. So he took my gun and clubbed Roy and then made out like he'd seen me doing it. But why would he want to kill Roy?"

McFadden pursed his lips. "I recall Roy and Rusk having a run-in. Roy caught Rusk cheating at cards and pounded hell out of Rusk. And Rusk is the kind of man to carry a grudge."

"That doesn't seem reason enough to want to kill a man."

"Sometimes it can be. Especially if the opportunity presents itself to make another pay for the crime."

"Maybe you're right," said Moore slowly. "Anyhow, I can go see Carson Rusk and find out what he has to say."

"You do that, Trace," said McFadden. "Wait around here until about midnight. The town will be dead by then and Rusk will just be closing up. Best chance you'll ever have of talking to him privately—and maybe use some persuasion. You can stay here until midnight and we'll talk . . ."

McFADDEN was quite willing to make conversation but Moore had little heart for it. McFadden said he was sorry about Eileen but he had always loved her and had always wanted to marry her and with Moore in jail like that McFadden had just gone ahead.

McFadden's words ran hazily through Trace Moore's mind. He had other things to weigh his memory. Those endless nights in prison, lying sleepless on his cot, telling himself, "You didn't do it, Trace. You didn't kill Roy. Someone else did it and framed it on you. But who was it? Who? Who?"

And that other hellish voice that would never be silent, that always insisted, "You were drunk. You didn't know what you were doing. Eileen meant a lot to you. And you'd lost her to Roy. So you killed him. Clubbed him over the head with your gun barrel. You killed Roy Watrous. You didn't know what you were doing but you killed him, killed him, killed him."

And he would lay there, bathed in a sweat that was not of the making of the hot, stifling atmosphere. . . .

Rory McFadden said, "Well, it's getting on to midnight, Trace."

Moore rose to his feet. McFadden accompanied him to the door, his clubfoot scraping softly against the floor. Moore said, a tightness in his throat, "Thanks, Rory, for being so square with me."

"Forget it," said McFadden gruffly.

There was a vast remorse inside Moore's heart for all the things he'd done and said to McFadden in the past.

Remembering, Moore said, "I don't see why you've done all this for me."

McFadden took Moore's hand. "I reckon I've done it for Eileen more than anything else. She's never really believed you killed Roy although the facts are pretty overwhelming. She refuses to believe it like that. That's why I want you to find the truth. I hope you find it for her sake—and for yours. . . ."

Moore mumbled a farewell and then he was gone in the darkness. McFadden's actions had left Moore slightly disturbed. It had all been so unexpected. From the one source where he had expected hatred and vilification had come only sympathy and understanding. He had always been wrong about McFadden, mighty wrong. Rory McFadden sure was a gent to ride the river with. . . .

VERMADA was quiet in the grip of night. Darkness lay everywhere except for a few isolated lights and the wind sighed wearily as thought it, too, were tired and ready for sleep.

His absence had not dulled Moore's sense of direction. He found his way in the darkness with a familiarity as though he had not been away for three years. The town was little changed. If it were daylight he imagined the town would look a little more drab, a little more colorless, than it had looked three years ago out of the day coach window as he watched the houses and buildings grow smaller and then vanish and thinking that he would know only the gray walls of the territorial prison for the rest of his natural life.

The streets were deserted. He stayed close to the buildings as he walked, where the shadows were thickest and where recessed doorways would offer him protection should he spy anyone on the walks.

But he saw no one and here he was at Carson Rusk's Square Deal Saloon. A light was shining dimly inside. Cautiously Moore peered through a window, taking in all the long barroom, and he saw only one man. A short, fat man, his back to the window, bald head shining in the light of the lantern, taking money out of the till. Carson Rusk, gathering the day's receipts preparatory to locking up.

Trace Moore drew his gun and, opening the door, stepped inside. Rusk turned at the sound and as he saw the drawn gun fear came to his face and, lifting his eyes, recognition came and with the recognition a look greater than terror.

"Trace Moore," he whispered. "Where—how did you get here?"

Moore walked slowly, his bootheels tapping hollowly on the wooden floor. "I see you haven't forgotten me, Carson," he said.

Rusk licked his lips. "Will you—uh—have a drink on me, Trace?"

"Not now. Maybe after while—when you've talked some and told me a few things."

"What kind of things, Trace?"

Moore shrugged but the glint in his eyes belied his casualness. "Oh, all kinds of little things. Like the truth about who really killed Roy Watrous."

"I—uh—Trace. You heard me testify in court."

"I did."

"I told the truth. I took an oath and I told the truth. I came into the room that night and you was pounding Roy over the head with your gun barrel. I knocked you down in your chair and took your gun from you. Then I slapped you sober. You was awful drunk that night, Trace."

Moore slowly drew back the hammer of his Colt. Rusk blanched. "I want the truth, Carson," said Moore grimly.

"I've told the truth. I swear to God I have!"

Moore said, "Maybe for two killings they'll hang me instead of letting me rot in prison."

Rusk's eyes grew wide and his mouth opened in a scream but it was not at Moore that Rusk's terror was directed. "No! No!" he shrieked, staring past Moore, and Moore heard the vicious whine of the bullet and the thunk as it hit Rusk and the sharp blast of the shot.

HE could hear Carson Rusk clawing, choking, gasping but Moore had no time to look at the man. He whirled as a second shot blared and a hot finger probed his ribs and he saw the gunman deep in the shadows of the open door.

Moore laid down his reply in two quick, hot blasts of his sixgun and he saw the gunman shudder. Raising his gun, the man in the shadows fired again and Moore felt the bullet hit him but the pain and the shock was not uppermost in his mind for in the gunflame he had recognized the other. That pale, drawn face and the dragging walk.

"Rory!" cried Moore. "Damn you, Rory! You dirty, double-crossing son!"

He saw the other fleeing, not rapidly, but slowly, drunkenly, and Moore realized that it was not only Rory's clubfoot that slowed him down. Moore stumbled in pursuit.

McFadden whirled, gun blazing, as Moore closed in. Moore's .45 roared in answer and Rory McFadden collapsed.

Moore's knees were water. He hardly knew what he was doing. He found himself on his hands and knees, crawling toward McFadden. Pain lay like a flaming haze over Moore's mind. He kept mumbling, "Tell me, Rory. Tell me."

McFadden coughed and when the spasm passed he spat blood. His laughter was weak and mocking.

"You killed Roy," said Moore. "You're dying, Rory. Tell me the truth."

"So are you, Trace," McFadden whispered. "You're dying, too. You're gonna die without ever finding out who really killed Roy. Maybe it was Rusk. Maybe it was me. Maybe it was you. You'll never know. You'll die without ever knowing."

"You killed him, Rory. Else why would you want to kill Rusk and me?"

"Ah, Trace, you blind fool. I was shooting at you and hit Rusk instead. I could have killed you back at my house but Eileen was there and she is still fond of you. I couldn't kill you there."

Moore was sobbing wildly. "Tell me, Rory. Tell me quick."

"You're gonna die without ever finding out who really killed Roy. You'll never know, Trace. Never. Never. Never."

Moore hoisted himself to his elbows and dragged his pain-racked body close to McFadden. Grabbing the man's shoulders, Moore shook him. McFadden's head wobbled loosely.

"Rory," Moore sobbed. "You dirty, dirty son," and he let himself fall, and though the distance was small, he knew he would never notice when he hit the ground for the heavy black shadow that was Death was already enveloping him.

HE discovered his error in the throb of flaming pain and he knew then he was not dead. Those days of agony and delirium were without number to him and it was with welcome that he felt the pain finally subside and all but vanish. And it was then they told him.

Carson Rusk had been mortally wounded but he lived long enough to do some talking. He told how Rory McFadden had peered into the back room window of Rusk's place and seen both Moore and Roy Watrous unconscious from liquor. McFadden remembered all the childhood taunts and indignities and quarrels. He remembered, too, that Eileen Mulvaney would look favorably on him if Moore and Watrous were not around.

The situation was perfect for McFadden. Climbing through the half-open window, he slipped Moore's gun from its holster and clubbed Watrous to death.

Then Carson Rusk entered the room and McFadden, trapped, bought Rusk out. Rusk could tell a convincing story.

But Rusk had not been done. After Moore's sentence to the penitentiary, he had made McFadden pay to maintain silence. So McFadden had resolved to kill two birds with one stone. Get Moore and Rusk together, kill both and blame Moore for Rusk's death.

That was how they told it to Trace Moore and he could only blink the tears from his eyes and say, "Thank you. Thank you ever so much."

And then Eileen came to him and placed her cheek against his and, stroking his hair, said, "We'll forget, Trace. Together we'll both forget . . ."

Again and again the whip lashed out, stinging his flesh!

**Every man was master of his own outfit, his own destiny, here in Gold Basin country — so long as trails and weapons didn't cross!**

**By L. P. HOLMES**

# SATAN waits at the CROSSROADS

THERE were several other freight outfits already at the camp grounds when Martha Gault put her pointers across the chain for the last sharp curve around the face of the bluff above the river meadows. Up here along the bluff the warm, reflected light of sunset still lingered, but down along the meadows the first powder blue dusk was beginning to flood and wagon fires were winking their crimson eyes.

Hooking the brake strap over her shoulder, Martha Gault leaned her weight against it, and brake shoes squealed in protest against the bite of the jolting wheels. Glancing at the slim, eager, black haired girl riding beside her, Martha Gault said, "Drift Enlow will be there, Julie. Keep your eyes and smile away from him, for there is no good in that man."

Julie stirred restlessly. "I have friendliness for everyone. I do not like to feel that there are some I may smile at and others I must not."

"Just the same," repeated Martha

Gault, "you will not smile at Drift Enlow, nor will you dance with him."

The road, as though weary from its rough and crooked way down the bluff, laid its last hundred yards in a smooth and pleasant curve into the meadows, and Martha Gault rolled her outfit to a stop between the wagons of Ezra Stent on one side and Ben Tipton on the other.

Bearded Ezra Stent called over, "Plenty of room at my fire for your cooking, Martha. You are welcome to it."

"Thank you, Ezra," said Martha Gault.

Between them, she and Julie lifted down the grub box from the back action and carried it over to the Stent fire. Then, while Julie prepared the evening meal, Martha Gault stripped harness from her mules, led them to the river to drink and brought them back through the steadily thickening dusk to the feed racks along the sides of the back action.

There was no physical beauty about this woman, Martha Gault. There never had been. She stood square and strong, like a man. Her stride was like that of a man, plodding, solid. Her features were big boned, rugged. Sun and wind, dust and heavy toil, had coarsened her skin, calloused her hands, toughened her muscles. Her eyes, puckered from years of watching endless miles of dusty, sun bleached roads roll back under the wheels of her wagons, were small and deep set. Yet they carried a spark indicative of the character of Martha Gault. Patience, courage and a hard practicality lay in that spark, leavened very slightly by a measure of dreams never realized and almost buried by the remorseless tramp of the years.

The sound of a voice over by Ezra Stent's fire caused Martha Gault to hurry through the last of her chore of caring for the mules, and to cross to that fire with her measured, solid tread.

"You eaten yet, Drift?" she asked curtly.

Drift Enlow turned, laughing in that big, loose, handsome way of his. "Why yes, Martha, I have. But—"

"We haven't."

JUST that, and no more. Yet the tone and the words said everything. Drift Enlow's white teeth still shone, but his laugh was now a set grimace and the blood burned strongly across his face. The glitter in his eyes had not the strength to withstand the level pressure of Martha Gault's glance. He shrugged his big, rolling shoulders and slouched away. Martha Gault robbed Ezra Stent's bucket of a kettle of water and tucked the fire blackened utensil into the glowing coals.

Julie was slicing bacon. All of the flush in her sun browned cheeks was not due to the heat of the fire. Her lips were pulled into a pout, slightly sullen. "Drift meant no harm," she said. "He spoke to me pleasantly enough."

A sap pocket in the back log of the fire exploded, scattering livid cinders. One of them struck Julie's bared forearm and the girl flinched and brushed it swiftly off.

"And fire," said Martha Gault steadily, "never burns until it touches you."

Young Ben Tipton and his wife came up to the fire. Martha Gault greeted them gravely. Good people, Ben and Molly Tipton. Martha Gault saw Julie brighten and the sullen pull of her lips soften out as she began talking with Molly Tipton. At which Martha Gault knew a comforting relaxation. There was no waywardness in Julie; just a hunger for life and the companionship of those near her own age.

With Ezra Stent and Ben Tipton, Martha Gault swapped news and gossip of the lonely, dusty freight roads. They were of the fraternity of free freighters, these people. They sought business wherever they could find it. The itinerary of their travels was wherever the ponderous wheels of a freight wagon might roll. They touched at mining camps in the mountains, at drab little cow towns in the sage country, at gaunt way stations and lonely ranches. They hauled anything and everything which could be transported at a profit. Each man's business assets were his mules, his wagons and the free roads he rolled them over. They

would haul on contract, on consignment, or often on sheer speculation.

Like Ben Tipton, with a full double wagon load of sawn lumber which he had picked up at a little wildcat sawmill back in the Tagalones. For it was rumored that a new strike had been made in the Gold Basin country, which in turn could mean a new boom town and a premium market for that sawn lumber.

And Tom App, according to Ezra Stent, had made the rounds of the cattle outfits back on Big Prairie and had picked up a nice load of beef hides for his trouble. And so it went, each man master of his own outfit, his own destiny.

Here and there across the country's vastness, where roads met or crossed, where favorite camp sites lay, the outfits crossed trails, met and gossiped, washed away for a time the solitary loneliness of their lives with simple, impromptu social gatherings. Thus they kept touch with the trends of business and such news of the open roads as to when and where each outfit was rolling.

Now it was Molly Tipton and Julie, arm in arm, moving off toward the Tipton wagons, with Molly calling sweetly, "Ben, would you get my trunk out? I want to show Julie."

Ben Tipton's face shone pridefully as he got to his feet. "Molly's expectin'," he explained. "She's already got a passel of things."

He hurried off and Ezra Stent took his pipe from his bearded lips and said, "The old ones die off and the young 'uns come on, Martha. Our tribe will last. Ben's hoping it will be a boy."

Martha Gault stirred slightly. "Molly won't mind it. She's the sort to rear a family in a freight wagon and never mind a minute of it. She's wagon-born and raised, herself, same as me. Never known anything else. I grew up riding a freight wagon, and when my mother and father died I took on where my father left off. But Julie would never be content, so. Julie craves permanence and order, though not realizing it herself."

Said Ezra Stent slowly, "Julie's changed a lot in the year gone. All quick, seems like, she's grown up. While she's unpromised you can't keep all the Drift Enlows away from her forever, Martha."

"Along the big loop north of Lake City there's a young cow rancher, Jim Alland. He stands straight, he thinks straight, he is straight," said Martha Gault. "Last stop at Lake City there was a fandango. He and Julie danced a lot together. He made Julie promise we'd stop by on our next trip through. We're stopping by."

Ezra Stent nodded his approval. "Young 'uns need a jerk line, same as a mule team, Martha."

"They need a jerk line," agreed Martha Gault. "And a name. I gave Julie mine. It is a good name and shall be kept so."

"I mind the time you found her," said Ezra Stent. "The coldest day of the coldest winter I ever knew. The winter of the big freeze. Cold enough to kill that granger and his wife, with their wagon stuck in a drift. But not cold enough to kill the babe in that wagon."

"Which was because they had used every blanket they owned to wrap around the babe, keeping none for themselves," mused Martha Gault. "A sacrifice I always remember when my patience has run short with Julie. I've felt if they could die for her, it would hurt me little to do a mite of living for her."

FARTHER along the meadow a larger fire than any other was leaping in rippling grace. And sounded now the first muted strains of Jake Peppernel's old accordion. Across the darkling meadow a stir ran. The shuffle of booted feet, the drift of shadowy figures moving in on the big fire. The deep resonance of men's voices, the light, quick laughter of women. Smaller wagon fires dwindling to beds of coals, little piles of scarlet jewels, dusted with greying ash. Freight wagons like weary giants at rest, mules munching at the feed racks, stamping a tired hoof now and then. Over all, the friendly stars and the cool, moist breath of the river.

Jake Peppernel's accordion picked up

to a faster, more rollicking tempo. The invitation was there, but a certain group shyness held the dancers back until tall Tom App caught his buxom wife about the waist and spun her laughing, into the clear. Others joined then, swiftly and eagerly.

Ben Tipton, obedient to a nod from his wife, led the eager Julie out and Martha Gault, watching, thought that of all of them, true grace was Julie's.

After Ben Tipton it was Tom App who claimed Julie, and Martha Gault saw that it mattered little to the girl who she danced with, just so she danced, just so she found expression in the freedom of rhythm. Martha Gault wondered at the thoughts of the girl, and hoped they were of that straight-backed, straight-eyed young rancher, Jim Alland, down along the big loop above Lake City.

There were others after Tom App, but not Drift Enlow, not yet. Martha Gault began to wonder until, beyond the fire and at the farthest reach of its radiance, she saw Drift Enlow standing there and watching Julie's every move. It might have been the reflection of the flames, yet it seemed to Martha Gault that in Drift Enlow's eyes there was a hard, bright, surface shine, like in the eyes of a circling prairie hawk, waiting its chance to swoop down on some full throated starling, singing in the sun.

Ezra Stent, moving slowly about the outer rim of light, came in beside Martha Gault. He said soberly, for her ears alone, "Drift's had a bottle in his wagon, and he's been tapping it. The loose devil in the man is beginning to stir. I don't like the way he watches the lass. If you wish it so, I'll speak to him, Martha."

Martha Gault shook her head. "I can protect my own, Ezra. And I will."

She moved away, threaded the darkness to her wagons. Soon she returned, carrying something coiled and heavy in her hand. She was none too soon, being just in time to see Drift Enlow thrust his heavy shoulders between Julie and slow, patient, good natured Lars Neilson, sweep Lars back with one arm and encircle Julie's slimness with the other. Drift began to dance, dragging Julie close, and the girl, startled and bewildered, stumbled a bit.

MARTHA GAULT sensed the startled stir about the fire, heard Lars Neilson's slow voiced protest. And she saw Ezra Stent begin to move forward. She stopped Ezra Stent and stilled the rest with a swirling gesture of her arm, a gesture which uncoiled and laid out on the earth a long, supple, sinuous length of close braided rawhide, thicker where she gripped it firmly, tapering down to a forked tip. A blacksnake whip.

Her voice rang in curt challenge. "You—Drift!"

Drift Enlow twisted his head, saw Martha Gault, saw the whip she held, read her bleak and settled purpose and the wild, whiskey shine of his eyes filmed to wariness. He spun Julie around until she stood between Martha Gault and himself. Martha Gault said, her words measured and distinct, "The whip was fashioned to use on an animal which would not learn its place. I will use it so, whether the animal be mule or man!"

Began Ezra Stent, "Martha, let us—"

Said Martha Gault again, "I can protect my own, Ezra."

By action, by word had Martha Gault shown Drift Enlow how she felt about him. This had done little good. Now she would use sterner measures.

Drift was steadily staring at her, wary and furious, using Julie as a shield. And Julie, twisting, saw Martha Gault and the whip. Instinctively she pulled at Drift Enlow's grip on her, got partly free, so that for a moment Drift's only hold on her was a hard fingered hand wrapped about her wrist. Martha Gault, seeing the opening, struck.

The whip slithered back, drove forward, fast as the dart of a snake's forked tongue. The lash wrapped around Drift Enlow's wrist with the snap of a rifle shot, and Drift's grip on Julie was broken. Julie spun completely clear and Drift, a curse on his lips, took a stride toward Martha Gault.

The whip, writhing back and forth

again, met him and lifted the breast pocket out of his shirt as though cut with a knife, leaving the flesh beneath crawling in swift agony. Drift Enlow's eyes went crimson and he leaped at Martha Gault, feral and savage. This time the whip met him across the face. That stopped him and wrung a bawl of animal pain and fury from him.

Martha Gault gave him no time to recover. She swung the whip as a man might swing it, hard and strong and sure. With measured deliberation and exactitude she whipped the rage out of him, the courage born of shame and pain, and finally the spirit itself. She drove him back, step by step across the circle of firelight. His arms, thrown high in fruitless effort to ward off that flickering, scorching lash, pawed the air aimlessly, and his cries were the dismal bawls of a wounded animal.

Still Martha Gault drove him back, while his arms dropped to wrap blindly about his head and face and his moves became loose and shambling. Back to the edge of the firelight and into the darkness beyond, back until it was Ezra Stent who caught her arm and said, "Enough, Martha — enough! You've broken the man!"

MARTHA GAULT stood beside the fire, her face expressionless. Outwardly she seemed composed, indifferent. Only she knew the tumult from within, knew that her stomach was a hard, quivering knot, knew the welling sickness which was spiritual, rather than physical.

Back in the darkness a chain trace rattled and clanked. Mules, stirred to activity, stamped and sneezed. No one about the fire moved, no one spoke. They waited, listening. And Martha Gault waited and listened with them. Until at length came the first creak and stir of heavy movement. Then there was the dark clumsy bulk of an outfit, rolling, moving out. Riding it was the hunched figure of a man who, for all the rest of his life, would be trying to get away from a shame he could never lose.

A man murmured, "It would have been kinder had she killed him."

Jake Peppernel lowered his accordion carefully into its battered, scuffed case. There would be no more dancing, no mere gaiety this night.

She stayed there, watching the fire dwindle and die. Her thoughts grew steady, went off on far wings, back along the years. To when she had been young, when there had been no softness or beauty, except in her dreams. These she had kept, these she had cherished as best she could, guarding them against the rough practicality which life forced upon her. And they had grown faint and elusive, vague and near forgotten.

Until she had found Julie, found her in that wagon, half buried in the snow drifts. And had kept her and raised her and seen those near relinquished dreams grow and take on renewed life.

This was what the others could not understand. In Julie her dreams had come back to her. In Julie they would find fulfillment. For them she had used the whip.

She felt better, having brought her thoughts to clearness on the matter. Inside she was quieting and the dogged, stoic strength came back to her. Her head lifted and she left the guttering coals.

Julie was in her blankets and Martha Gault could hear the girl's muffled sobs. These, Martha Gault knew, would pass. Like the roughest miles of any freight road. They always passed, given time, to fall behind and be forgotten. So much of life was like that.

So Martha Gault waited with the stars until Julie slept. Then she spread her own blanket roll, spread it close enough so she could reach over and pat with gentle hand a slim, sleeping shoulder.

And now contentment came to Martha Gault. What she had paid, what she had given away, was little enough to what she would gain. For tomorrow would bring a new day, a new sunrise and the wagons would be out and rolling. Rolling toward the big loop, north of Lake City. Where straight-backed, straight-eyed Jim Alland would be waiting.

# THE LOCO LAWMAN

By JOHNNY LAWSON

**The badge was a sure one-way ticket to boothill, but Shawn O'Rourke still figured it would look nice pinned to his shirt. . . .**

WHEN Shawn O'Rourke announced himself as a candidate for sheriff of Ringo County, the citizens of Cactus City shook their heads in despair. Law enforcement was sure in a bad way when they had to turn over the star-packing chore to a fancy-dressed, irresponsible young dandy like Shawn. Doubtless, they said it was just another lady-killing stunt of his. The tragedy, though, was that this time it would be Shawn who got killed. On that point, there could be no uncertainty. The last three sheriffs in a row, all two-fisted, gunslinging he-men, had found a badge a one-way ticket to boothill. And Feg Mallon, the hombre who had bushwhacked one and outdrawn the other two, was still on the loose.

But since Shawn's candidacy was unopposed, there was nothing to do but elect him. Old Judge Lew Jaspers swore him in at the courthouse, releasing a brown jet of tobacco juice in forceful expression of his disgust as soon as he had done so. He handed Shawn the somewhat tarnished badge that had been worn so briefly by the three previous ill-starred lawmen.

"A young whippersnapper like that," the judge muttered. "It won't be two weeks till we'll be out o' sheriffs again. Though where we'll dig one up is more'n I know, 'less it's in the cemetery."

Shawn took the badge and looked at it critically. Among these older men, he looked young—too young for this job. "The star's a little rusty, Your Honor," he said, "but I reckon it'll do."

With that, he walked out of the county building, polishing the badge on the sleeve of his fancy shirt, and headed toward the saloon down the street.

"If anybody wants to see me on business, I'll be keeping office hours at the Red Dot," he told the men as he went out. Which was a mighty funny way to run a law job, but what could they do? Even a sheriff like this was better than none at all.

At the Red Dot, Shawn greeted the cowpokes at the bar with a wave of his hand, tossing the badge in the other hand like a luck piece. The men nodded recognition, but withheld any demonstrations of approval as they took in O'Rourke's silk bandanna, his tooled-leather holster and gunbelt. There was more than one grin at the bar and a shrug or two. O'Rourke was a man you just couldn't take seriously.

The idlers watched Shawn make straight for the rear of the saloon, toward the dressing-rooms of the dancers who furnished nightly entertainment in the Red Dot.

For the next few days Shawn spent al his time in the saloon. He sat at a table in the middle of the room, with his back to the door, apparently with nothing on his mind except polishing the nickel-plated badge which advertised his position. He asked the bartender for some metal polish and a rag, and carefully cleaned off all the rust. Then he sat there, just flipping the badge in his hand, or blowing on it and polishing it with his silk bandanna. He seemed almighty proud of that badge.

When one of the cowhands tackled him about Feg Mallon, he just laughed.

"Feg Mallon?" he said. "That gutless half-brother to a sneakin' coyote? Why, he'll never show his ugly phiz around this town again."

"What makes ye so sure?" the man asked.

"What makes me sure? Why, the miserable son is scared, that's why."

"Scared o' you?"

"That's right—scared o' me," Shawn stated.

The cowhand looked at him in amazed unbelief. Then he went to pass Shawn's words along—the words that would reach Feg Mallon's ears and write finis to O'Rourke's career as a lawman.

Shawn watched him go, then turned back to his absorption with the heft and shine of his sheriff's badge.

ON the fifth day of Shawn's tenure of office, the cowpoke who had first spoken to Shawn approached him.

"They say Feg Mallon's on the prod," he said. "Somebody told him what you said about him. He didn't like it none. You better find yourself a safer place to set than this here saloon."

"I couldn't think of a safer place, if Feg Mallon's all I got to worry about," said Shawn.

Shawn sat humming to himself, watching the poker-players at the big gambling-table, playing with his badge. But by mid-day, the men had slowly drifted out of the saloon, finding business to take them away. Feg Mallon would be showing up any time.

The bartender stood polishing glasses, regarding Shawn somberly from beneath bushy brows.

The bartender was just about to open his mouth and curse Shawn out for a brainless idiot, when he was cut off by the sudden bulging of the batwings. Before he could move, he was staring into the one-eyed menace of a sixgun levelled at him by the left hand of Feg Mallon. On Mallon's dark, blue-stubbled face was a sneer of scorn, as he deliberately drew his right-hand gun from its holster, and brought its sights down on Shawn O'Rourke's back.

But before the gun's roar sounded, there was a single sharp screech as Shawn's chair scraped the floor. Then Mallon's gun went off, but the bullet sang through the space where Shawn's head had just been and tore into the wall beyond. Now it was Shawn O'Rourke's gun that was roaring, spitting flame as he whirled from a crouch and fired, throwing lead as fast as he could trigger it straight at Feg Mallon's bulking form.

Shudder after shudder ran through Mallon's frame as the slugs hit him. Then he slowly sank to the floor.

The bartender gaped in amazement. He stared first at the beefy carcass of Feg Mallon in the doorway, then at the sheriff standing there.

Finally he managed to get a word out.

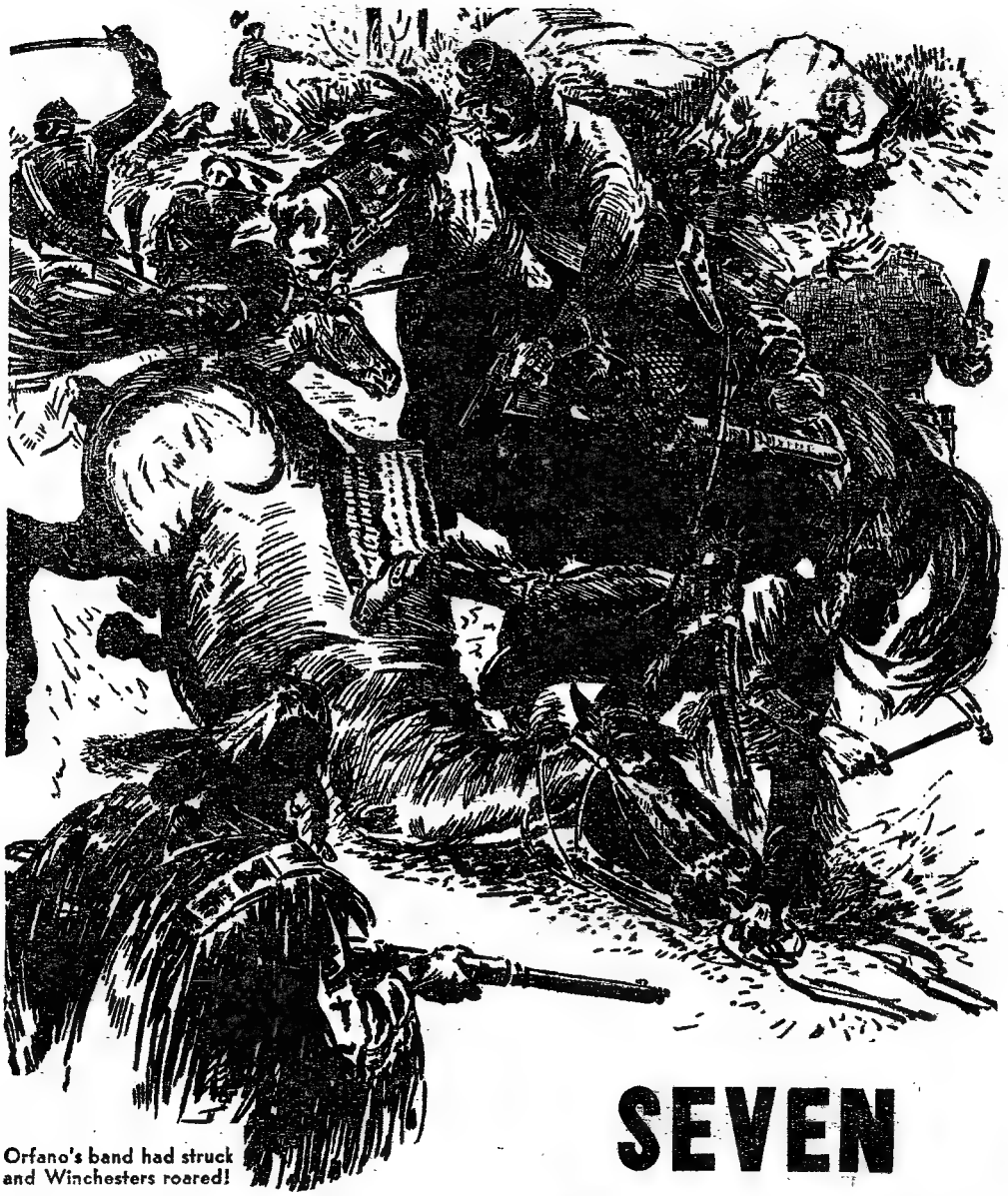
"I'll—be—damned!" he said. "That's the first time I ever saw anybody outshoot Feg Mallon. And after he had drawed on ye, too. How in—?"

Shawn's face broke into a grin as the tension flowed out of him. He holstered his sixgun, then walked over to the table and picked up the badge he had left lying there. He pinned it on his shirt, for the first time.

Shawn walked over to the bar. Silently, the bartender set out a glass and poured him a drink. Shawn lifted the glass, then touched it to his badge.

"Here's how," he said, and drank.

The bartender stared at the badge. What he saw, in its polished, mirror-like surface, was his own face staring amazedly back at him.



Orfano's band had struck and Winchesters roared!

# SEVEN RODE OUT

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

**GIVE A TREACHEROUS APACHE IMPLEMENTS AND SEEDS, THEY TOLD ALEC SMALL, AND HE'LL TRADE THEM FOR GUNS. BUT ALEC DIDN'T SAVVY THAT BRAND OF HATE-WAR PALAVER . . .**

THE APACHES had long ago learned that by cutting down a few telegraph poles here and there, they could cripple the Army's best means of communication—and so bog down pursuit. But General Miles, who replaced Crook, was as wily as the Indians. He borrowed a British device, the heliostat, and soon a system of giant mirrors was flashing orders and reports over hundreds of miles of desert and mountains. B Troop, out of Camp Grant, picked up word of Orfano's marauding

band from the heliostat, and promptly headed for the Pinals.

B Troop, under Captain Phil Hammond's command, had no Signal Corps personnel assigned to it, but Trooper Alec Small could read the code flashes. Trooper Small was new to B Troop, and until now his campaigning had been done behind a headquarters desk. That career had ended when Grant's commanding officer wearied of his orderly's constant imbibing, and demanded, "Why in thunderation must every clerk in the Army be a whiskey-swiller?"

"Sir, if it wasn't for whiskey," Alec Small had replied, "there'd be no clerks in the Army."

The next day, in reward for his humor, he had been given a chance to raise a crop of saddle corns. . . .

NOW and then, such a man could be found in the ranks. A misfit unsuited for barracks life or field duty. Since the Army was no antidote for the poisonous failures and troubles of civilian life, it was a mystery why the type joined up. However, Alec Small's past was no secret. He had come west as a young man, taken a schoolteaching job at the Red Rock Agency of the Ute Reservation in Colorado. After ten years among the more or less peaceful Utes, Alec had written a book, *Our Red Brethren,* which had been published in the East and given its author something of a reputation. In Washington, the Indian Bureau had sat up and taken notice. Alec had been made Agent at Red Rock, but he had bumbled the job and at the end of six months his blundering had made him the laughingstock of the West. The Red Brethren had been too much for him.

But if his past was well known, his reason for enlisting as a cavalryman was obscure. It may have been done on a day when he was suffering from a hang-over, for, after his failure as an Indian agent, Alec had taken to drink. But now, in the field, he tried hard enough.

It appeared that he wanted to be an honest-to-God trooper. But the saddle punished him, and horses gave him a touch of asthma. Desert sun and wind burned him lobster red. His earnestness, once the whiskey was sweated out of him, was the only soldierly thing about him. He tried so hard that Captain Hammond, after the heliostat message was decoded, sent him out on patrol with the civilian scout, Aubrey, and four other troopers under Second Lieutenant Macklin. As the patrol saddled up, some of B Troop's hardcased veterans joshed Alec by chanting their version of the Rogue's March:

"Poor little soldier,
Poor little soldier,
Handed a gun and sent to hell
Because he couldn't soldier well!"

Alec's sunburned face showed a painful grin. A burly trooper yelled, "You aim to catch Orfano and his band by sprinkling ink on their tails, Smart Alec?"

The laughter rose in what seemed to Alec a suffocating wave. He could still hear it crashing against his ears ten minutes later, when the patrol rode away from B Troop's bivouac. He was that thin-skinned.

He had been laughed at a lot during the year since he had made that blunder at the Red Rock Agency. Yet it had been an honest mistake. He had believed he could make the Utes self-sufficient by training them in the ways of the white man, and his first step had been to make them into farmers. With Indian Bureau funds, he had purchased farming implements and seeds. He had hired several white farmers to teach the Utes, and when spring came the project was ready to start.

But the Utes, after a winter of being cared for by the Bureau, had other notions. They jumped the reservation—and took Alec's costly implements and seeds with them. They had headed into Arizona, traded the implements and seeds to the Apaches for guns and horses—and the Apaches had taken the farm stuff across the Border where Mexicans were

glad to barter for such precious contraband. . . . And the joke had been on Alec Small. His trusting schoolteacher's nature hadn't been able to cope with the sly Utes. He had been laughed at for believing that the tribesmen could learn to think and live in the manner of white men . . . when any real frontiersman knew that the only way to change an Indian's nature was with a rifle or a cavalry saber. And now Trooper Alec Small, on his first patrol, was apt to learn that the hard way.

THE patrol headed deep into the rocky furnace of the Pinals, seven riders venturing into Apache country. The day grew long and hot and dusty, and the unmarked trail led through rock-walled fastnesses. Higher up were pine-studded slopes, but on the canyon floors there grew only cactus and catclaw and sparse forage grass. With Aubrey, the scout, riding ahead, the patrol probed and found nothing at all.

Lieutenant Macklin rode with Sergeant O'Mara, and next came Troopers Harmon and Schultz. Alec rode at the rear with the leathery-faced, tobacco-chewing Trooper McSwan, and finally asked, "Tim, who's this Orfano?"

"A damn' Apache," McSwan growled. "What'd you think?"

"I know he's an Apache," Alec replied, swallowing the rebuke. "But how is it he's never been heard of until now?"

"First time he turned 'bronc'," McSwan told him. "Until he jumped the reservation with this band, Orfano was a peaceful 'Pache. He worked around the San Carlos Agency as interpreter and handyman. He savvies white man talk. According to Aubrey, Orfano is a young buck who's lived at the Reservation only a couple years. When he was a kid, three or four years old, some Mexicans found him after a fight between them and his people. . . . For some loco reason, the Mexes kept the kid and named him *El Huerfano*—the Orphan. They were sheepherders, and they drifted into New Mexico. They turned him over to a rancher, so he grew up among white folks and got to be called Orfano." McSwan paused, spat a stream of tobacco juice at a yucca stalk. "Me, I'd bet my next month's pay—if I live to collect it—that Orfano won't be caught. He's too smart to ride into a trap."

"We'll catch him, Tim."

"Listen who's talking!"

"We'll catch him," Alec went on, "just because he's learned to think like a white man. We'll know how his mind works. Like I said in my book—"

"You and your book," McSwan growled and spat now to show his contempt. "You know why he jumped the Reservation? Just because he never learned to think like the white folks who raised him. An Apache always turns bronc when he drinks *tiswin*. That 'Pache corn-beer is might powerful stuff."

"So Orfano and his band were drunk on *tiswin?*"

"So Aubrey says."

"Well, by now they'll be sobered up," Alec argued. "And Orfano will see he made a mistake. I figure we'll catch him—"

He broke off as Sergeant O'Mara looked back and growled, "Quiet, Small—Quiet!"

THE afternoon wore slowly on, and the heat of hades lay like a weight upon the seven men of the patrol. Sunglare was reflected from cliffs and sandy ground, and made eyes ache. The men sucked at their canteens, and sweated out the moisture as fast as they drank. They saw no hostiles. They grew weary of peering at every pine clump and every jumbled maze of rock that might conceal Orfano's armed band.

But it seemed that they were alone in the world, and Alec had the eerie feeling that the patrol was cut off and lost from all other men. McSwan and some of the others softly cursed the unseen Apaches. But Alec felt neither fear nor hatred for the enemy, and it occurred to him that he had never seen an Indian laugh. . . . Up ahead, now, Aubrey was riding closer to the troopers.

By four in the afternoon, the little

column halted. Aubrey had something on his mind and talked low-voiced to young Lieutenant Macklin. The scout was lanky, as dark as an Indian, while the officer, not long out of West Point, was thick of body and fair-skinned. Tim McSwan eased close to listen, then reported to Alec that Aubrey smelled smoke. "He figures," McSwan whispered, "that the Apaches are baking *mescal* somewhere not too far ahead." The scout was pointing toward a jagged mountain. "Thereabouts," he told Lieutenant Macklin.

The officer took out and studied a map, then wrote out a dispatch. He handed the paper to Sergeant O'Mara, and Alec, as O'Mara swung around, looked elsewhere. He didn't want to be picked as a courier; he wanted to see what lay ahead.

O'Mara said, "You, Harmon," and held out the dispatch.

Harmon swung to his mount and started along the back-trail, seeming glad to be gone. The remaining six pressed on through the rock-bound emptiness, Aubrey sniffing of the smoke none of the others smelled.

THERE in a narrow defile, as the sun went down, the patrol came face to face with a part of the Apache band. Colt pistols and Army Springfields opened fire first, but Apache Winchesters roared a quick answer. It was more of a melee than a battle, with riders stampeding through roiled up dust and wafting powder smoke, and the din of it rose to a wild crescendo. During those few flaming minutes that seemed an eternity, time stood still for Alec Small. He heard and saw and smelled the fight, but somehow did not feel it. He was strangely numb, and if that was fear, it was not too bad. Alec fought his plunging bay horse as hard as he fought to fire and reload and fire again his Springfield, and all the while he could see the lurid flashes, bright against the thickening dusk, of the quick-firing Winchesters.

When the firing ceased and the Apaches had vanished, Alec slipped from the saddle and stared at a sprawled heap among the rocks. It was a dead pinto pony, and pinned beneath it, by the legs, was a live Apache. Alec saw glittering black eyes in a squat dark face, drawn back lips and bared teeth. He saw the Indian's awkward attempt to bring his rifle to bear. Alec used his boot, hastily.

Trooper Schultz came running, cursing in his Bavarian German, lifting his carbine to smash the Apache's skull. Alec grasped Schultz's arm and swung him aside. "Don't," he yelled. "He's helpless."

"He's better dead—ya!" Schultz muttered. "Better for us."

He came on again with his carbine, and Alec stepped in front of him.

"Dammit, Schultz; he's my prisoner!"

Lieutenant Macklin came up, then Aubrey. They stared at the trapped Apache, and the officer muttered, "O'Mara's dead. We got only one—besides this bronc."

Aubrey was taking a fresh chew of tobacco. He said, "And this one's Orfano."

DARKNESS came suddenly, completely. The patrol moved back from the defile, into the broader canyon. There were five now, with O'Mara gone, and they took the prisoner with them. Midway through the inky canyon, Aubrey signalled a halt. Men held their horses, held their breaths, while the scout listened. There were no sounds in the night; at least, Alec Small heard nothing. But finally Aubrey said, no louder than a sigh, "They're all around us. We better fort up as best we can, Lieutenant—until Captain Hammond gets here."

A rifle cracked, and Aubrey sank down with only a wispy gasp. McSwan swore, and growled, "Who said Injuns don't fight at night?"

The hidden rifle cracked again, and an Army mount screamed horribly and fell in a thrashing heap. Macklin spoke an order, and the decimated patrol flattened down behind boulders. Alec pulled Orfano down, and the Apache, speaking for the first time, said in English, "You four are dead men."

"Maybe so," Alec muttered. "But we're not afraid to die."

"You lie," Orfano grunted. "All white men fear death."

His arms were bound behind him, his injured legs must have tortured him, but he was calm in a fatalistic way. In his early twenties, Orfano was stockily built in the way of his people. He was naked to the waist, but he wore white man's jeans. His hair was cut as short as Alec's own, yet he wore the Apache-style red band about his head. To Alec Small's mind, Orfano was a strange admixture—a white man's mind in an Apache body. He was still certain that the Apache thought like a white man.

"What about you?" Alec asked. "Are you afraid of death, Orfano?" He wasn't a soldier when he spoke the question; he was the schoolteacher with the inquiring mind—the book-author seeking truth. "How do you feel about dying?"

"If I was afraid, soldier," Orfano told him, "I wouldn't be here."

"Why'd you do it?" Alec went on. "Why did you turn bronc?"

Orfano didn't answer that.

A sliver of a moon rose, and once, dimly limned, half a dozen half-naked warriors were glimpsed on a high rock shelf. There was an occasional movement about the canyon, a deliberate maneuver to draw the soldiers' fire. McSwan and Schultz grabbed at the bait, and a dozen Apache rifles opened up in reply. McSwan was hit in the head and died without a sound. Another horse was killed. Lieutenant Macklin cried out, hit in the left arm. Alec was all empty inside. He could not force himself to look at McSwan's slumped form. He had liked McSwan.

THE sniping kept up, and Schultz fired an occasional shot in reply. Alec crawled back to his post and found Orfano in a sitting position, his back to a boulder. The Indian's face was as blank as a rock.

"No good in this," Alec said, with sudden anger. "Why'd you start it?"

Orfano was slow in answering. "Some of the young men drank too much *tiswin*. They talked of the old days. . . . Of Geronimo and Victorio and old Nana. Drink made their hearts bold and put fire into their minds." The Indian's voice grew guttural, but his words were clear—with a poetry woven through them.

"But you knew it was foolish, Orfano," Alec said. 'You know there are too many soldiers."

"I knew," Orfano replied. "When they were gone, I got my pony and followed. I told them it was crazy, but they wouldn't listen. What could I do but ride with them? They stole horses from the ranches, true. But I kept them from raiding and killing. We fought a posse that tried to stop us, and tonight we fight because the soldiers fired first. The *tiswin* is gone from their bellies now, and they know it was a mistake. But they're afraid to give up."

"Afraid? Apaches afraid, Orfano?"

"Of being sent to Florida, like Geronimo and the others."

"But the longer they stay out, the more soldiers they kill," Alec muttered, "the worse it'll be for them. Maybe some will be hanged."

Orfano's voice lost its poetry, took on the harshness of anger. "I know all that, soldier," he said. "Another day—in two days, maybe—I could have led them back. But there are forty of them, full of the fear of prison, and now they'll have to be beaten. Many of them will die, along with many soldiers."

"If you had the chance, you could take them in?"

"I'm a prisoner, soldier."

"If I freed you, would you give me your word?"

Orfano's eyes seemed to glow. "You'd take an Apache's word?"

Alec said, "Yours, Orfano," then heard Lieutenant Macklin call softly, "Ready, Small. . . . Schultz, fetch the horses." The officer was silent a moment. Then: "Get rid of the prisoner, Small. We can't take him with us."

Schultz grunted, "Ya; kill him. I'll finish him off." He came forward, crouching low, and Alec saw the brute

look on his face—and the saber in his hand. "Damn you!" Alec flung at him. "Your orders are to get the horses. He's my prisoner, and I'll take care of him!"

Schultz cursed him but turned away, going deeper into the rocks for the horses. Alec crossed to Macklin, and gasped, "Sir, Orfano says he could take the band in. If you let him live and—"

"Enough of that, Small!" Macklin growled. "I know about that damn' fool book you wrote and how you tried out a crazy policy of putting Indians on their honor. I won't hear to any such nonsense. We can't take the prisoner with us, and he's too dangerous to turn loose. You'll obey orders—and do away with him!"

Alec swallowed and turned away. Schultz came up with three horses. Macklin got up with an effort, his face twisted from the pain from his shattered arm. He had trouble in mounting. The sniping increased, and a ring of rifle flashes revealed that the Apaches knew a break was to be made. Alec drew his saber and lay the point to Orfano's throat.

"Your word?"

"You have orders to kill me, soldier."

"I don't want to kill you," Alec said fiercely. "Give me your word that you'll try to take the band in, and I'll turn you loose!"

He knew that disobedience of orders was a soldier's greatest sin, yet he was still the man who believed that Indians could be won to the ways of the white man. He heard Lieutenant Macklin yell above the roar of Apache guns, "Small, come along!"

Then Orfano said, "I give you my word, soldier. But only because you are a white man who'll take an Apache's word."

Alec grabbed him, flung him down onto his face, and used the saber to cut away his bonds. He whirled and ran to the horse Schultz was holding for him.

Wild Apache cries rang out. The darkness was ripped by spurts of powder flame. Alec saw Schultz and his mount go down. He saw Lieutenant Macklin hit again, but regain his balance and ride on. Alec felt a hammer blow at his left side. . . .

BACK at sweltering Camp Grant, days later, Trooper Alec Small and Lieutenant Macklin lay abed recovering from their wounds. Time was heavy on their hands, and in Alec's mind was a nagging worry. It was more than worry; it was guilt. There was no word of the bronc Apache band. B troop had come in to Grant with the two wounded men, and two other troops had been sent out.

If more men died, Alec knew the blame would be upon his head. Should Orfano lead the band in other fights against the Army, Alec Small would have made an even greater mistake than that at Red Rock.

The post surgeon, Major Anders, came in. He said to Lieutenant Macklin, "Word just arrived from the San Carlos agency. Orfano's band came in last night. Funny, but those Apaches came in of their own accord."

A sigh of relief escaped Alec Small. Major Anders stared at him. Lieutenant Macklin turned his head with an effort and looked across at Alec.

"You said they'd come in," Macklin said. "You told Captain Hammond that, when we broke out of the trap and reached the troop. How . . .?"

Alec remembered. He had been full of pain and nearly unconscious at the time, and Captain Hammond and some others had laughed. . . . Now he looked at Major Anders, and asked, "Sir, did Orfano himself come in?"

The surgeon shook his head, and Macklin said, "You forget, Small. Orfano's dead.

There was an odd look in the lieutenant's eyes. He knew. Alec looked away. But the guilt was gone from his mind. The risk he had taken with Orfano proved in part, at least to him and perhaps to Lieutenant Macklin, that an Indian could be reasoned with—and if there were men who still laughed about the Red Rock mistake, the laughter would no longer hurt. Alec went back to watching the lizard on the ceiling, and he was smiling.

# PEACEMAKER PAYOFF

By HUMPHREY JONES

**Buckling on his gun-belt, Big John savvied the grim truth at last—that the only way to palaver with a tinhorn killer was behind the fastest draw!**

YOUNG RANSE CALDWELL, sitting on the porch with his back against the ranch-house wall, could hear the argument going on inside between his father and his mother. It was the first time he had ever heard them quarrel, and he bit his lips as he worked on the bridle he was mending.

Ranse fired up at the balcony as Old Tim drew!

"Oh, John," Hannah Caldwell was pleading, "for twenty years we've lived here in peace and happiness, why can't we—"

Big John Caldwell's heavy voice cut her off.

"I'm sorry, Hannah. I've listened to you too long already. For the past four years Heffernan and his men have been rustling off our herd two and three at a time, squeezin' in on us till we ain't got enough cows left to keep us in barbecue meat. Heffernan's got our mortgage, and he'll have the ranch altogether if I don't do somethin' about it."

"Can't you go to him peaceable, John, and get him to extend your time—?"

Big John exploded then. "There's only two ways to reason with the likes of Heffernan—with the highest card or the fastest draw! I've got to go, Hannah!"

The screen-door came banging open, and Ranse's father came bursting out across the porch. He was buckling on a gun-belt around his hips, the big .45 in its holster slapping against his thigh. His high-heeled boots pounded across the boards, then spurted dust in the yard as he headed for the barn. A couple of minutes later the heavy-shouldered man emerged, seated on his bay mare, and pushed off at a gallop down the road.

"Wa-al! Ain't never seed yer paw in sech a hurry!" A cracked voice drawled at Ranse's side. It was Old Tim Cassidy, the aged odd-job man whom Ranse and his father had picked up half-dead on the desert three years before. He had been robbed of the gold he had spent years scratching the creek-beds for, and left to die out there of heat and thirst. Since then, the old man had hung around the ranch like a hound-dog, making himself as useful as he could in return for nothing but his keep.

"I come up from the bunkhouse for a cup o' yer maw's java. Couldn't help hearin' 'em argyin'." The grizzled oldster came up on the porch and pushed his white thatch aside to peer through the screen. "Yer maw seems tolerably upset. She's settin' in there, cryin' to herself. Maybe ye oughta go in, Ranse, an' sorta perk her up a mite."

"It wouldn't do no good," the youngster answered tonelessly. "This time she ain't gonna soften nobody with her weepin' an' prayin'."

"Wa-al, 'tain't none o' my business," Tim said. He hauled a cut of chewing plug out of his shapeless trousers and bit off a corner. "Still—" He scratched his stubble of beard. "I gather yer old man's figgerin' to go down to Heffernan's saloon, git in the poker game, an' win a big enough stake to pay off the mortgage."

"Yes," Ranse said. "An' he'll do it, too."

"Ye-eh!" the old man drawled. "I ain't sayin' he can't bring it off if the cards is dealt straight. I know he used to be a pretty cool customer with the cards afore he married yer maw. I gathered that much from hearin' 'em talk. But Black Jack Heffernan ain't the kind to let a man walk out o' his saloon with a pocketful o' dinero."

Old Tim chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then unloosed a spurt of brown tobacco juice. "Ye know, Ranse, that there is one poker game I'd kinda like to see."

THE kid looked up at him. Their eyes met, and a silent agreement passed between them. Ranse nodded, and got up. The two of them headed for the corral where the other horses were, caught ponies, and saddled up. In a few minutes they were riding away from the ranch-house, leaving Ranse's mother alone in the building, weeping quietly to herself.

As they rode, Ranse felt a surge of pity for his mother. But his main feeling was actually one of elation. For a long time he had secretly rebelled against his mother's raising him like a sky-pilot's son, and causing his father to keep his gun hidden in a trunk and ride unarmed. Ranse had stormed against the depredations that had thinned their herd out till the ranch was losing money. But Big John, out of worship for the kid's mother, had refused to listen. The kid

had inwardly turned against his father then, seeking out Old Tim for companionship. And now he felt happy because he was once more free to admire and respect his father.

In the meantime, Old Tim had been an understanding sidekick. He had sympathized with the youngster's feelings, and entertained him by the hour in the bunkhouse with his tales of the Civil War. Cassidy in his youth had been a cavalry sergeant with Robert E. Lee, and had an impressive collection of medals, including one which the great man had pinned on him personally, so Tim said. When tales would no longer suffice, Old Tim had conspired with the youngster to slip his dad's big .45 out of the trunk and took him up into the foothills to teach him its use. He had even found ammunition for the kid to practice with, so that Ranse could smuggle the six-shooter back into the trunk every night. That way there was no evidence of its having been used unless one looked closely enough to see the shininess of the butt and the fresh oil on the cylinder. Ranse had gotten a thrill out of this clandestine target practice, but he still nursed a secret disappointment that he couldn't have a weapon of his own.

Otherwise, he was thinking as he and Tim rode through the dusk on his father's trail, he'd be up there siding his dad as an equal, not tagging along after him as a helpless onlooker.

After half an hour's ride, the two saw in the dusk the shadowed cluster of buildings which was Cactus City. The only one lit up was Heffernan's Pleasure Palace, a combination saloon, gambling room and dance hall. Since this was the first of the week, there wouldn't be much of a crowd. Just now, the stage on which Heffernan's dancing-girls put on their lavish entertainment would be dark, for that part of the house was closed except at flush times of the year, after the cattle shipments.

THE place was quiet as Ranse and Tim slid down from their saddles and tied their mounts to the hitching-rail. There were only a couple of other broncs there, one of them Big John Caldwell's mare.

Ranse pushed open the batwings and sent a quick glance around the inside of the saloon. A small man with dusty boots was drinking alone at the bar. The owner of the second bronc, apparently.

Toward the back, Big John Caldwell sat in a flood of light under a big chandelier playing a two-handed game with the Palace's dealer, a thin man in a tailor-made vest and pants. At another table, playing separately, were Black Jack Heffernan and two men whom Ranse identified as his henchmen. Black Jack was a large, sleek-looking man in a white shirt and a frock coat with padded shoulders. From the direction of his glances, he was more interested in his dealer's game than his own.

The kid and the old man took places near the far end of the bar. Ranse ordered a sarsaparilla and Tim a shot of bar whiskey. Then they turned to watch the game.

Big John Caldwell had a stack of blue chips in front of him. Either Big John's luck had been good, or he had been outguessing the gimlet-eyed dealer. Ranse noticed that Big John's .45 hung free at the side of his chair, and that he sat well back from the table with his hands resting on its edge. He was in position for a fast draw if necessary. Ace Braden, the dealer, was wearing an underarm holster strapped over his vest. With no coat on, his draw would also be fast.

From where he was standing, Ranse couldn't see the cards. But he could see the movement of the chips and hear the men's low voices as they made their bids.

Big John Caldwell picked up two cards, studied them briefly, then shoved a handful of blue chips out onto the center of the table, adding to the already sizeable pile.

"A hundred to see me," he said.

Ace Braden eyed him for a long moment. Play at the other table stopped while Black Jack Heffernan also watched narrowly to see whether Braden would call the bluff.

Braden picked up his cards and mulled them over. Then, deliberately, he counted out ten blue chips and shoved them out. Caldwell spread out his cards. Braden laid his down slowly.

"Three jacks beat aces and tens," said Caldwell, and reached out to haul in his take.

Heffernan and his two rannies were now openly watching the game. Ranse and Tim looked on tensely, their drinks untouched. The only man in the room unconcerned with the poker game was the solitary puncher at the bar, who now downed the last of his drink and shouldered out through the batwings. Ranse heard him ride off.

Black Jack Heffernan got up from his chair. Ace Braden glanced toward him, and Ranse saw Heffernan nod almost imperceptibly. Big John's back was turned to Heffernan, so if he caught anything it was the communication in Ace Braden's eyes. He gave no sign.

HEFFERNAN'S polished boots flashed in the lamplight as he passed across the room on the other side of the table and started up the stairs which led to the balcony around the front of the saloon and along the side over the bar. Ranse knew that his office was in one of the rooms that opened off the balcony. The others were sleeping rooms and dressing rooms for Heffernan's fancy ladies. Another set of stairs at the far end of the balcony led down to the back entrance and the rear of the stage. At the bar, Ranse could hear Heffernan's boots on the floor above him, then a door opening and closing as he stepped into his office.

Ranse's mind raced. He figured that Heffernan had given Braden some kind of a signal, and then got out of the road so that he wouldn't be involved if there was trouble, leaving his hired gunnies to do the dirty work. He wanted to cry out a warning to Big John, but knew it would do no good.

The two gunnies moved over to the table.

"This game looks interestin'," the taller of the two said. "Deal us in."

They settled down at opposite sides of the big table, as Braden set out chips for each of them. Big John was now almost surrounded. It would take fancy gunwork to handle all three in a battle. But Big John just inched forward on his chair and said nothing.

Ace Braden's deft fingers dealt out four hands quickly. The pot was opened by the gunsel on Big John's right. Big John promptly raised the ante by laying down his cards and moving to the center of the table a double handful of the blue chips.

"Raise it two hundred."

There were startled looks on the faces of the two newcomers. First one, then the other threw in his cards. Ace Braden eyed Big John narrowly, edged a matching pile of chips out. Big John dropped two discards. Braden slowly flipped him two more cards, then picked up his own hand and studied it. He threw a nine down, face up, and reached for the deck. For an instant his long hand covered the cards, as he picked up the pack in his right hand. As he dealt off the card, he switched the deck into his left hand, concealing the movements of his fingers.

Suddenly Big John's voice cut into the tense stillness. "Oh, no," he barked. "Take it off the top!"

Ace Braden's eyes suddenly became a pair of diamond-hard stones. He held the card before his chest, his hand barely six inches from the polished butt of the .44 in his shoulder holster.

There was a quick movement at his right as one of the gunsels went for his iron. But Big John's right hand was free, and was ready sweeping the big .45 up from his thigh. The scraping of his chair against the floor as he leaped to his feet was drowned in the roar as he beat the other man's draw and blasted the six-gun from the man's hand.

Almost simultaneously, there was another roar, and a giant fist seemed to catch Big John's chest, knocking him off-balance. Then Ace Braden and the other gunnie had their irons out, and were

pumping lead into Big John's body. Caldwell crumpled to the floor like a steer collapsing, his frame jerking as slug after slug tore into him and through him. The two men kept firing even after he was dead.

Ranse, with Old Tim at his side, looked on in open-mouthed horror, powerless to intervene.

The gunnie with the bullet through his hand came slouching over to the bar and ordered a whiskey. His good hand shaking, he downed it a gulp. He squinted at Ranse.

"You're his kid, ain't yuh? Too bad yuh had to see that. But yuh seen he fired the first shot." He set the glass down. "Yuh'd better git him out o' here before Black Jack throws him out with the garbage."

ACE BRADEN and the other man had holstered their smoking guns and headed up the stairway toward Heffernan's office, leaving Big John's body heaped in the middle of the floor, alone.

The tears came and blurred Ranse's eyes. A great, inarticulate curse lodged in his throat, making a lump that choked his breath. Followed by Tim, he went over to his father's body. The heavy figure lay inert, eyes staring. Blood was soaking through the riddled shirt and forming a pool on the board floor. Old Tim bent down and gently closed the eyelids with his fingertips. Ranse loosened the .45 from his fingers and gripped it.

Old Tim looked at him, reading the thought in his mind.

"Not now, son," he said. "Yuh wouldn't have a chance. Think o' yer maw."

Wearily, Ranse nodded, then shoved the gun inside his belt.

"Fer now," he whispered.

Together they got Big John's body up off the floor and outside, and hoisted it over the mare's saddle. Ranse tied his belt to the saddle horn to keep him from sliding off, then he and Tim mounted their broncs. They swung off toward the ranch, the bay mare with its burden following.

The only sound was the *chug* of the spades and the occasional clink of steel against stone as they shoveled. Within the ranch-house there was still only the grief-stricken silence that had come to Hanna Caldwell when they brought her husband's body home the night before last.

Tim Cassidy had fetched the Methodist preacher out from Cactus City to read the burial service. When Ranse and Tim had lowered the rough pine-board coffin they had made into the earth, he had ridden off, leaving the two to fill up the grave again.

When the last shovelful was in place, they patted the earth smooth around the wooden headboard, and Ranse placed some flowers he had gathered. Then they started back to the bunkhouse. Ranse had soon given up trying to comfort his mother, for she was utterly inconsolable. But though deep pity for her swept Ranse, he was not swayed from the resolve that had formed in his mind.

"I always wanted to see you grow up a man, Ranse," Old Tim was saying, "but I sure hate to see you go back into that nest o' rattlesnakes."

"Somebody's got to get justice for my father's murder."

"Ye'd have a pretty hard time provin' it was murder in a courtroom, son. Yer paw fired the first shot. It looked like a fair gunfight."

"It weren't. My paw wouldn't o' killed no man except in self-defense. He was just out fer his own. Besides, the bullet that killed paw didn't come from nowhere near that table."

Old Tim nodded. "Ye figgered that out, did ye?"

"A lot happened all at once. But I got it straight enough in my mind to know that the slug that hit paw first must o' been fired from that balcony over the bar. All that other shootin' was mostly to cover up. I looked at them bullet holes. There's one that goes in at an angle that could o' come from only one place—from just about where the door o' Heffernan's office is."

"So ye think yer gonna go gunnin' for Heffernan himself?"

"Yes."

The old man shook his head. "Maybe yer maw's right, Ranse. Maybe I never should o' showed ye how to handle that .45. Yer pretty good with it, for a button, but Heffernan's the best shot an' the fastest draw in the valley. He'd gun ye down like a prairie dog. An' he wouldn't give ye no head start on account o' yer age, neither."

"Mebbeso. But I gotta take the chance."

"Whyn't ye wait till you've grown up a bit more. Wait'll yer more Heffernan's size. A couple o' years won't make no difference if revenge is what yer after."

"That ain't all, though. You fergit Heffernan still has the mortgage on this ranch—the mortgage that would've been paid off if paw had been let to finish that hand. So I reckon it's up to me to finish it for him."

"Wait a minute, Ranse. You ain't no poker player like yer paw. Ace Braden'll clean you out in five minutes."

"If he played a straight game, yes. But I figure Ace Braden won't give me a fair chance. He'll stack the cards to get rid o' me as fast as he can, and that'll be my opening. He'll have to forfeit if we catch him out on it—and live."

"It was four to one against yer paw."

"It'll only be three to one against me. There's one gunnie with a bullet through his hand."

"When do ye figger ye'll be ridin'?"

"Tonight."

"All right, son. I'll be ridin' with ye."

A DOZEN punchers turned from the bar. It was a little after eight, and young Ranse Caldwell and old Tim Cassidy had just shoved through the batwings of the Pleasure Palace. News of Big John's shooting had spread, and the appearance of his kid here only two days later could only mean trouble.

Ranse, followed by the old man, paused just inside to run his eyes over the room and search out the men he was looking for.

Ace Braden was dealing poker at the big table as usual to a couple of cowhands. Black Jack Heffernan wasn't in sight, but the two gunnies, one with a bandage around his right hand, were drinking at a table with a bottle between them. After flickering glances, the three pretended unawareness of the newcomers.

As Ranse headed for the gambling table, though, his father's big .45 in its holster swung conspicuously against his thigh. He had hitched the belt up to the last notch, but it still hung loosely on him, like a handed-down garment, so that the butt of the sixgun hung far down on his leg. Tim Cassidy wore no gunbelt, but the bulge in his shirt-front was obvious.

Ranse moved toward the back of the room. He glanced up toward the balcony over the bar. One of the doors was slightly ajar, and behind it Ranse caught the gleam of a kerosene lamp. Black Jack Heffernan was in his office.

Ranse strode up to Braden's table and threw down a handful of gold coins. Ace Braden looked up and met his eyes for the first time. Braden's eyes were cold, expressionless.

"Deal me in," Ranse said, his voice as commanding as he could make it.

"No kids in this game," Braden announced, ignoring the money. Ranse flushed. He was about to flare out hotly, when Tim Cassidy grabbed his arm.

"Deal 'em to me," he told Braden. "I'm playin' for the kid." He put his hand on the coins and gave them a shove toward the dealer.

Braden shrugged, and counted out a stack of chips. Old Tim sat down in an empty chair and gathered the chips in front of him.

The two other players looked at each other.

"I'll cash in my chips," said one.

"Same here," the other announced. This game was none of their business. Braden paid them off, and they shoved their chairs back, got up, and retreated

to the bar. Ranse saw a quick exchange of glances between Braden and the two gunnies at the table. He went over and took up a position against a post near the table where he could see everything going on at the tables, and still be able to watch the door of Heffernan's office. When he looked up, he noticed that the lamp had gone out, and that the door was further ajar. With his room dark, and the tables below flooded with lamplight, Heffernan would have a tremendous advantage in any shooting.

Ranse dared to look up only out of the corner of his eye, however. He couldn't afford to tip these men that he was on guard against Heffernan.

As Tim sat down, he loosened his belt and allowed his shirt to fall back from around the bulge inside it. The handle of an old Dragoon gun appeared. The gunnies watching concealed smiles at the old man's crude armament. Only Ranse knew how swiftly and accurately Old Tim could clear and fire. In Ace Braden's expressionless eyes, Ranse thought he detected a flicker of contempt. He added it to the margin of overconfidence he was counting on.

Ace Braden dealt the cards. The deal was straight, as far as Ranse could tell. The old man wagered cautiously, taking no chances as yet. Tim Cassidy had played plenty of poker in his day, and his mind was still sharp and clear. At the end of the first half-dozen hands, he was holding just about even.

THE move came on the tenth hand. Tim had edged ahead, then on the strength of two pair, had plunged. There was enough money on the table now to more than clear the mortgage. Before calling for the draw, he shoved his entire stack of chips to the center of the table. He was forcing Ace Braden's hand.

Braden matched Tim's bet, as Ranse had foreseen. Tim flipped out one card. Braden removed one from his hand, and placed the other four face down before him. He edged the top card off the deck toward Tim. He reached for the deck to make his own draw.

Ranse saw Tim's foot go back, in readiness for a sudden spring up and away from the table. Knowing that attention was focussed on the card table now, he chanced a glance at the balcony. The door had opened another foot. Though he could not see Heffernan, he knew he must me waiting there.

Ace Braden's hand came down over the deck, and his fingers moved, slicking a card out. At that instant, Old Tim's leg uncoiled, and he shot up out of his chair and to one side, his cards spilling on the table as his hand darted to the handle of the gun.

At the same moment, Ranse, as soon as he saw the old man's heel dig in, ducked around behind the pillar, cleared the .45, and threw a hurried shot up toward the door where Heffernan was waiting. He saw splinters fly from the moulding, and a shadowy movement, as of a man ducking back. He had gained a precious second.

The crash of his shot was followed within a fraction of a second by the bellow of Tim Cassidy's old Dragoon gun. He had caught Ace Braden with his shoulder gun half out of its holster, blasting a huge black hole at the base of the man's throat.

Ranse darted a look toward the still-dangerous gunman at the table. He knew a terrible moment as he saw that one part of his calculations had gone wrong. Instead of concentrating his fire on Ranse, the gunslinger had levelled on Old Tim as soon as Ranse had gone behind the pillar. Ranse came around the other side swifly to get out of the line of Heffernan's return fire, but in the split-second's interval, the man blasted a slug into Old Tim's side before turning to meet Ranse's challenge. The diversion was fatal. Ranse's second shot caught him midway in the act of changing his aim. The man clutched at his belly with his free hand, swaying, and still trying to bring his sixgun to bear on Ranse.

Tim's ancient weapon roared again, spinning the gunslinger around and knocking him to the floor. Then the old man collapsed to the floor.

THERE was suddenly silence, where an instant before had been a pandemonium of snarling sixguns. Ranse crouched behind the pillar, temporarily shielded. The other gunnie, the one with the bandaged hand, was backing slowly away toward the wall, his arms upraised.

The only enemy left was Heffernan, lurking somewhere up there in the darkness, waiting to gun Ranse down the second he left the shelter of the pillar. Pinned there, Ranse watched Old Tim die slowly on the floor before him, and suffered anguished seconds as he realized there was nothing he could do.

Suddenly ducking down, Ranse triggered a shot upward, at the same instant starting a sprint for the stairway that led to the balcony. There was no answering fire from the darkness above.

At the bottom of the stairs, Ranse crouched, panting. Once more, he was shielded from Heffernan's fire. He scrambled quickly up the steps to the top, so that he could see along the balcony.

Heffernan wasn't in sight. There was only that door opening inward into an ominous darkness.

Ranse propelled himself up onto the balcony. He flattened himself in the shadows, seeking the cover of the dark. For the first time, he was on equal terms with Heffernan, if Heffernan stepped out of that door.

"Come out, Heffernan!" he shouted. "You murdered my father, and I'm going to kill you for it." The threat sounded scared and shaky.

There was no sign from Heffernan's office. Ranse tried again.

"Come out, Heffernan, or I'm coming in after you." Ranse's stomach suddenly tightened. If Heffernan did wait for him to come in, he would be framed in the doorway. A gunman of Heffernan's calibre could hardly miss a target like that.

Ranse shouted desperately, edging closer along the balcony. "I'm coming in to get you, Heffernan!"

The men at the bar below had by now all moved over against the opposite wall, and formed a silent audience. Ranse stopped to wipe sweat from his eyes. Tension seemed to hang over the saloon like a pall. Ranse felt weak, wondering if he had the guts to go through with it. And then the last-chance idea came to him in a flash.

"Heffernan!" he shouted, "there's twenty men out here, watching me coming in after you. I'm coming in to get you, Heffernan, and the whole town's watching!" He was gambling desperately on stinging Heffernan's vanity. Ranse moved away from the wall a little, bracing himself on spread legs. Then he started forward once more.

"Heffernan—!" he began again. But Ranse never finished the sentence.

Black Jack, goaded beyond caution by the humiliating situation, stepped from the doorway, and Ranse's trick had worked. The darkness instantly blazed with the flame of sixguns, and the silence erupted into a roaring storm of sound. Two shadows, one slight, the other tall and bulky, stood in the half-light, firing at each other point-blank.

FOR once in his life, Ranse's small size stood him in good stead. With too little time for either man to take aim, the bullets with the largest target found their mark. Ranse felt hot lead pluck at his clothes. But the months of practice with Tim Cassidy up behind the hill paid off, and Black Jack's looming form jerked as the slugs hit him. He spun around and lurched sideways, then fell headlong. His weight hit the railing, and with a ripping sound his body crashed through and fell to the floor below.

Reaction hit Ranse then. He suddenly felt weak as a baby, and he wanted to sit down and bawl. But he knew he couldn't let himself. He was a man now.

He slid the smoking .45 back in its holster. It had been Big John's, but now he knew it was his, for he had earned the right to wear it. And he knew that now his mother would understand that right, understand that peace had a price sometimes that could be paid only in blood and hot lead.

Ranse walked down the stairs and over to the bar. The men lined up beside him, and he drank with them.

# Dead Man's Badge

**By John H. Latham**

Lon moved in before the Kid could draw!

***The Cochise Kid was as gun-swift as the dead lawman and about the same build — but did he have the tinstar's guts, and could he fool this girl who loved the badgetoter?***

THE COCHISE KID had been riding for hours across the arid, desolate Trans-Hondo region. And whenever he looked back, which was often, the yellow dust cloud hung in the distance.

The Capitans and the little cowtown of Arabella were sixty miles behind him. The Rio Hondo was back there, a refreshing memory that he tried to keep out of his mind. For the Kid had come forty grueling miles without water. His mount was leg-weary, its hide first lathered and now streaked with salt where the lather had dried. And the Kid told himself that he'd swap his meagre bankroll and new Nocona boots for a drink out of a cow-track.

He was following a long, narrow ridge that sloped up toward the Picachos. Around him low hills, sparsely covered with greasewood and stunted sage, slid together in rocky folds as dry as the searing heat that beat at him out of a

brassy sky. The wind was a blast from a furnace, snaking little dust devils across the ravines.

The Kid wore low-thonged sixguns and his crossed cartridge belts were studded with shells. He had a sawed-off .30-30 saddle gun in a rawhide scabbard slanted under his left stirrup. He had ridden by a dozen places where he could have ambushed Marshal Zack Logan.

But the Cochise Kid didn't play the game that way. He was headstrong and reckless, but he wasn't a killer—in spite of the fact that Zack Logan was carrying a warrant in his pocket charging the Kid with shooting a man in the back. He even admired the tenacious type of lone wolf that Logan represented. The marshal had trailed him for nearly a month—all the way from the Brasada, in southern Texas, to this high New Mexico desert.

The Kid looked back, and his cracked lips hurt a little as they parted in a grim smile. He hadn't thought the marshal would be so close. Zack Logan was pushing his horse to the limit. Closing the distance to sixgun range. Yet he had never pulled his saddle gun or six-shooter.

Apparently he wanted to take the Kid alive.

Back there, miles back along his trail across the desert, he had waved his hat and hallo-ed at the Kid. The Kid might have accepted the entreaty, and turned back, but the dark, timbered canyons of the Picachos seemed to beckon him on. Up there would be water, and freedom, if he could dodge the lawman. He knew that Zack Logan and Logan's horse were in a condition comparable to his own.

The Kid narrowed his dust-rimmed eyes and stared at the mountains ahead of him. The foothills broke into raw gullies and canyons. Beyond the bare, rocky ridges loomed the higher peaks, hazy in the coppery blaze of the afternoon sun. Dark stretches of pine and pinion and cedar, like pointing fingers, reached down into the canyons. The springs and little, trickling streams there would be icy cold from winter's snow, the Kid knew.

But he wouldn't let himself think of water. His tongue felt like a cottony ball, too big for his mouth, and the sun no longer sucked moisture from his dry skin. The horse was nearly done, too, stumbling on smooth stretches of the trail.

THE bald granite ridges grew rapidly in size as the Kid rode toward them. He was angling for the open mouth of a canyon that spilled its silt and debris in a fan-shaped mound on the desert. A massive gray shaft had broken from the wall of the canyon, towering two hundred feet and more above the dry plain. Weathered rubble and huge, crumbling boulders choked one side of the shaft; but through a notch on the other side the Kid could see the wide floor of the canyon sloping up in serrated steps toward the high, timbered coolness of the jagged Picacho Peaks.

The Cochise Kid stopped in the shadow of the saw-toothed rock and looked back. The marshal's desert-gaunted horse had apparently played out on him, for Logan had dismounted and was leading the tired animal up the last slope. The lawman had his head down as he climbed, grasping occasional stunted tar-bush plants and sage to pull himself upward, and each painful step told of the aching bone-weariness that dragged at the man's muscles.

The Kid gauged the range at three hundred yards. He'd knocked down running deer at the same distance. He slid his saddle gun from the scabbard, adjusted the sights, and levered a shell into the firing chamber. He snugged the stock to his cheek, narrowing his eyes against the white glare of the sun bouncing from the surrounding rocks. When he squeezed the trigger, a little plume of rock particles and dust flew up in front of Zack Logan.

The marshal stopped and looked up, as if studying the lay of the land. He looked back across the dry, barren plain they had crossed. Then he tugged at the reins, urging his unwilling horse to follow, and came doggedly on.

The Cochise Kid did not shoot again.

A kind of baffled, angry, ironic smile tightened his sun-cracked lips as he shoved the rifle back in his boot and rode on.

It gave the Kid the creeps, the way Zack Logan had stuck to his trail like a burr to a saddleblanket. He'd given the marshal the slip back in Texas, and put five hundred miles and a state line between them. But Logan had picked up his trail. He'd somehow traced the Kid to Arabella, on the eastern slope of the Capitans. He'd showed up there with a warrant from the territorial governor, ordering the Kid's arrest—and the Kid had gotten out of town just two jumps ahead of the marshal and a posse.

The posse had quit after the first ten miles. When the excitement and whiskey died out of them, they'd had no stomach for a grueling chase across sixty miles of greasewood and desert.

But Zack Logan was still back there. As implacable as death, the Kid told himself bitterly. It was said of the marshal that he had but one god, his duty, and that he wasn't afraid of anything that walked on two feet. The only way to stop him, the Kid knew, was to kill him.

That's why the Kid's dust-caked lips were twisted in a hard, mirthless grin as he rode on. It might mean a hang-rope, but he didn't have what it took to shoot a man down in cold blood. . . .

It was cooler in the canyon, where the sheer walls, eroded by wind and water into fantastic shapes, shut out the sun. The trail skirted the base of the towering shaft. Talus, weathered off the sides of the shaft for centuries, crowded the trail. The Kid was riding through this narrow opening when a hard voice lunged at him from behind the rocks.

"All right, hombre—turn this way. Ride easy and keep your hands away from your guns!"

A COLD chill rowelled up the Kid's spine as he reined in his horse. He saw in one lightning glance that he was covered from both sides of the canyon, and that there was no chance of fighting his way out. His shoulders sagged in defeat. A kind of sick, helpless desperation took hold of him.

He'd been a fool, he told himself bitterly. It hadn't occurred to him that some member of the posse might wire ahead and set a gun-trap for him. But it had happened, and he'd ridden smack into it. The scorching run across the dry, waterless desert had been hell on him and had nearly killed his horse—and it was wasted!

Three men had been holed up behind the rocks, waiting for him. They commanded a view of the trail for miles back, and it made the Kid grit his teeth in helpless rage to think of them sitting there in the shade, drinking water from wet burlap-wrapped canteens, while he suffered the thirst of the damned out on the desert. That rage thinned his lips and narrowed his burning eyes as he slowly lifted his hands and swung in the saddle to face them.

One of them he had seen before, in a saloon in Arabella—a tall, too-handsome man who rode a long stirrup with a kind of jack-deuce swagger.

The man had blue-black jowls that a razor could never scrape quite clean, and slitted eyes as sharp and green as broken bottle glass. He was something of a range dude. Judging from his yellow silk shirt and foxed California riding pants and gold-spangled Mexican sombrero. But his bony wrists hinted whip-lash speed. He had a saddle gun in his hands and the Kid noted that the silver-mounted six-shooters at his hips were notched with "credits."

Prince would be the man's name, if the Kid remembered correctly. Sam Prince.

The other two were nondescript riders, alike in their slovenly garb, the sort who sometimes work cattle but more often work their fellow-men.

"Take care of our friend, Lon," Sam Prince said to one of them.

THE man so addressed grinned at the Kid and told him to get out from underfoot, and handed him a canteen of water. "We drank up that quart of forty-rod Sam brung along," he grinned twist-

edly, "while we were waitin'. But maybe this will wash the alkali dust out of your gullet."

It wasn't what the Kid had expected at all. He took the canteen and drank sparingly from it. The smell of the water and the sound of it sloshing in the canteen made his thirst-maddened horse swing around in the trail, slinging its head and fighting the reins in frantic eagerness.

At a nod from Lon, the Kid dismounted and poured some of the water into his hat. He let the horse drink enough to stop its trembling. And his mind, all the while, was racing ahead with the speed of a trip-hammer.

There was a puzzle here the Kid couldn't figure out. Lon kept him covered with a rifle, but no one made a move to lift his guns. And Sam Prince and the other man were watching his back-trail.

"You gents are wastin' time," he finally drawled, smiling a little. "That hombre back there ain't ridin' *with* me. That's Zuck Logan!"

"I know," said Prince, and notched his sights on the weary, plodding figure. The rifle cracked sharply in the narrow confines of the canyon, and the stunned Cochise Kid saw that stooped, stumbling figure drop like a beef that's been hit in the head with an axe.

The Kid didn't even stop to think that Zack Logan had been after him. His hands flashed down to his guns. It was a wicked draw, deadly fast. But the gaunt, angular Lon, who'd kept the Kid covered all this time, had been watching him. He had seen the rage and horror that leaped into the Kid's eyes. And he was moving even before the Kid started his draw.

The snub-nosed barrel of his Winchester slammed down across the Kid's head, spilling him to the ground. . . .

WHEN the Cochise Kid came to, the three men were grouped around him. Lon and the other rider—a short, dark man with a bullet-scar gouged in his cheek—were scooping out a shallow grave in the soft sand.

Sam Prince was squatting on his bootheels, rummaging through the dead marshal's pockets. A cigarette was loose-held in his lips, the smoke curling past his slitted eyes. He seemed to have no more qualms over cold-bloodedly killing a man than the Kid would have had if he'd stomped in the head of a rattlesnake.

The Kid sat up and groaned as pain reverberated through his aching head like the throb of a Kiowa war drum. He lifted a shaky hand and gingerly explored the three-inch rip in his scalp, where Lon had tried to dent his skull with the Winchester barrel. His hair was blood-wet and the wound was already beginning to puff up like a goose-egg. His hat had been the only thing that kept the blow from killing him, he guessed.

Sam Prince looked at him and grinned.

"So you finally come out of it," he said. "If it'd been 'Pache, here, instead of Lon, he'd have gut-shot you just to see you kick. He's got a streak of Injun in him that makes him mean that way."

Lon and the squat, scarred 'Pache had finished the grave. Lon was sweating freely, but there was no sign of sweat or any emotion on the breed's stolid face as he squatted on his hunkers and rolled a smoke. He looked at the Kid out of little eyes as black and unreadable as lava rock.

The Kid had blood on his fingers from the wound in his scalp. He scrubbed his hand clean on his chaps. He shook his head to clear it, and that sullen, murderous rage was back inside him as he stared at Prince.

"I don't get this," he said flatly. "Why shoot the marshal? I thought you wanted me."

"We did," Prince acknowledged, and seemed oddly amused by the situation. "But we wanted you—alive!" His cigarette had burned down nearly to his lips. He shoved out his jaw, tilting the cigarette upward, and studied the Kid for a long moment out of squinted eyes.

Back in Texas, the Cochise Kid was known as a reckless, headstrong young puncher who had ridden fast and loose,

on both sides of the law, through the Big Brasada. He had run wet cattle across the border when the moon was right, and swapped lead with Rurales and Rangers in the Texas and Tamaulipas brush. But the law had never been able to pin anything on him until Marshal Zack Logan got a warrant sworn out for his arrest on a charge of attempted murder.

SAM PRINCE had that warrant in his hand as he looked the Kid up and down, like a buyer judging the fine points of a horse. The Kid was in his middle twenties, with that look of hard care that comes to every hunted thing, whether man or animal. He was medium-tall. and lean-muscled from all the riding he had done. He was wearing old bat-wing chaps and a wash-faded shirt that strained across his shoulders. His hair was the color of new rope and he had an easy grin that spread his wide mouth still wider and crinkled his eyes almost shut.

But the Kid wasn't grinning as he stared back at the big, handsome range dude, Sam Prince. He still had his guns. He didn't know what he'd ridden into, but his first shot would be at the tobacco tag hanging from the pocket of Sam Prince's yellow shirt if they crowded him.

Prince must have read his thoughts, for his green eyes went cold and brittle.

"Don't crowd your luck, Kid. I sized you up in Arabella, and I know you're quick with a gun. But you wouldn't stand a chance ag'in the three of us. So simmer down. Tuck in your shirt-tail. If I'd wanted you dead, I'd have let 'Pache cut your throat. He enjoys that sort of thing."

The Kid had to admit that. If they'd wanted him dead, they could have killed him at any time since he'd ridden into their gun-trap. Prince had proved that by the merciless way he'd cut down Zack Logan.

"All right," he said. "What's the tally? What do you want with me?"

"I've got a job for you, Kid," returned Prince, in the same ugly tones. "It's a job that pays big, and it's as legal as this piece of paper I'm holding in my hand. If you take it, you can make a Mexico stake and live across the border like a king for the rest of your life. If you turn it down, it'll likely prove fatal. I'll pack you into Picacho City across a saddle and cash in this warrant for whatever it's worth. Savvy?"

The Cochise Kid knew he wouldn't like any proposition Sam Prince might make, but he nodded. "I savvy," he said coldly. "So turn up your hole card. What kind of job is it?"

"A legal job, like I said," Prince told him. He handed the Kid a bloodstained letter that he had taken from Zack Logan's pocket. "Here, read this," he ordered.

The Kid took the letter out of the envelope. It was addressed to Miss Julie Logan, Cuero, Texas.

*"Dear Sis,"* he read. *"The trail is about over. I'll bring the Kid in. I fully realize this is the most important case I've tackled in a long time. To see justice done is ample reward for the man-killing hours I've spent in the saddle.*

*"I may not return to Cuero at all. I have been offered a job in Picacho City, and there is something about these New Mexico mountains that gets in a flat-country man's blood. The beauty of them. The high, clean air flavored with pine and juniper and fir. I was never a poetic man, but this high country would inspire poetry in anybody . . ."*

THE KID read no further. So old Claiborne had died, after all! The hopelessness of the situation swept over him. As long as the rancher had lived, there'd been a chance that the Cochise Kid might go free. The only evidence the law had to convict him with was circumstantial. That and the fact that the whole country knew the Kid and old man Claiborne, with neighboring brush-popper spreads there in the Brasada, had been fighting for years over grazing rights and water and general cussedness.

But now the Kid knew he could never

prove that he hadn't fired the fatal shot. He was innocent—but it wouldn't make any difference when they sprang a trap-door from under him and let him drop twice his length to the end of a hang-rope. Black, sullen bitterness swept over the Kid at the thought. This was the kind of cruel, vicious, macabre joke that life had been playing on him from the time his parents were killed by Indians and he'd been left an orphan, on his own. Out of one tough scrape into another. Fighting back blindly because the odds were always stacked against him and he was bound for hell, anyway.

The trail ahead looked mighty bleak and lonesome to the Kid as he put the letter back in the envelope and handed it to Sam Prince. A hunted man with a price on his head, always wary of his back-trail. His past had been turbulent, shaping a troubled pattern for what lay ahead, and he looked to the future with dismal misgivings.

About all he could expect with his kind of dog-eared luck, he reflected glumly, was a final quick plunge through a gallows, or maybe a chunk of law lead in a last shoot-out with some sheriff. A man who rode the Whisper Trail could have no friends. Zack Logan was dead, but there's be others like him. Bounty hunters who wore sneak badges pinned to their undershirts and killed for blood money. From now on, if the Cochise Kid wanted to live, he'd have to be suspicious of any stranger who took more than a passing interest in him. He'd have to rely on his guns and his wits, if he wanted to get by.

"All right, Prince," he said stonily. "What's your proposition?"

"I thought you'd see the light," grinned Prince. "Play the game our way and you'll get along all right, Kid." He put a crimp in a fresh quirly and struck a match on his boot-heel.

"It's just this, Kid. There are two political factions in Picacho City, and they're at each other's throats. One of them put its candidate in the sheriff's office in the last election. The other side controls the judge of the commissioner's court and the county attorney. The sheriff met with—accident, right after he took office. Somebody stuck a knife in his back one dark night."

Prince looked at the half-breed 'Pache and grinned faintly. "The bunch that backed the sheriff was plenty riled," he went on. "They looked around for somebody to take the sheriff's place—and picked the toughest peace officer in Texas and the Territory. Zack Logan! But Judge Rawley and the boys didn't figure Logan would play ball with them. They thought you would, Kid."

"You don't make sense," said the Kid, flatly. "I've got a price on my head."

"Sure, you do," Prince answered. "But Zack Logan don't. I told you I sized you up in Arabella the other day, Kid. I knew Logan back in Texas. You an' him are about the same build. He's got black hair and yours is 'dobe yaller, but a little mustache dye will fixe that up. You're about the same age. Nobody out here knows Logan, except by reputation—and you're as fast if not faster with your guns than Logan ever was. So, we're going to let it be known that the Cochise Kid is dead, buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in the Picacho Mountains by the tough Texas lawman who killed him.

"Aan' from now on *you'll* be Zack Logan, Kid!"

THE scheme was so staggering in its simplicity that it left the Kid stunned. "So that's why you bushwhacked the marshal," he said, "so you could run a ringer on the folks in Picacho City!"

"That's right," Prince agreed. "And it's why I've waited until now to put a bullet through you, Kid—in case you renege on the deal!"

He smiled, his lips sliding back from white, even teeth, but his eyes were as hooded and dangerous as the stare of a coiled rattlesnake. He had been so sure of the Kid that he hadn't even bothered to disarm him, but now his fingers touched the butt of his gun and Lon and 'Pache were tensed to draw if the Kid even looked like he wanted trouble.

"You won't get away with it," said the Kid.

"We'll make it stick," Prince assured him. "Judge Rawley can sign a man's name better than the jigger can do it hisself. He'll address a new envelope for this letter, and add a note saying the Kid's dead and Logan has taken the job in Picacho City. We'll mail it, and nobody back in Cuero will be suspicious. By the time folks here learn better—it'll be too late!

"All right, Kid," he added softly, "what'll it be? You going to play along with us or not?"

The Kid shrugged his shoulders. "When another man holds all the aces," he said without humor, "I usually play his game."

SO Picacho City got a new sheriff. On the day he arrived and was sworn in by Judge Rawley, a delegation of citizens gathered in his office to size him up. They saw a tall, lean young man with jet-black hair, sitting at the spur-scarred desk whose previous owner had expired rather suddenly in the line of duty.

The new sheriff was younger than many of them expected. Nor was there any of the razzle-dazzle that legend had linked with the famous Zack Logan, one of the frontier's finest peace officers. He was quiet and mild-mannered. He wore a rather battered Stetson, a new broadcloth suit, and two old Walker Colt's snubbed low in tied-down holsters. The only affectation that any of them could see about him was the badge he wore: it was the gleaming marshal's star that he had brought with him from Cuero, Texas.

"I'm Zack Logan, gents," he told them. "Could be you've heard of me. I'm the new sheriff here, unless somebody craves to object."

No one among them had any such craving. They wanted a town-tamer, and Zack Logan had that reputation. But there was a murmur of disapproval when he named his choice of deputies. Sam Prince and Lon Best were the men he'd selected to help him keep law and order in Picacho City and the surrounding county. 'Pache Fyfe was the new jailor.

One thin, ramrod-straight old rancher remained after the others had left. He had drooping cow-horn mustaches and faded-blue eyes that revealed an old man's penetrating wisdom of his fellowmen and life. He introduced himself as Jubal Horne, chairman of the reform committee and owner of the J-H Connected.

"Son," he asked bluntly, "why'd you deputize them polecats? I've never seen a straight lawman yet who'd keep crooks on his payroll."

"They were recommended to me by Judge Rawley," the new sheriff answered, as casually as he could. "I know the duties of this office, Horne. I'll run it as I see fit."

Jubal Horne stared at him for a tight-lipped interval. "I see," he finally said, and his raspy old voice cracked like a whip-lash. "Son, Rawley would like to own this town—lock, stock and barrel. He'd like to own the county. He's money mad and he's power mad. He stole an election and got to be judge of the commissioner's court, and he's got some dirty scheme up his sleeve that will mean the devil's own brand of trouble for every decent man and woman around here.

"You just be damned sure of one thing, son. Be sure you run the sheriff's office, *instead of it runnin' you!*"

With that grim warning, Jubal Horne turned and stalked angrily out of the room. And the Cochise Kid, staring after him with faintly worried eyes, had the uneasy feeling, like a premonition of disaster, that the old rancher had seen right through his disguise.

THAT feeling stayed with him during those first weeks in Picacho City, when he was living up to the bright reputation that Zack Logan had made as a peace officer, and adding new lustre to it. For the town was split wide open, with trouble shaping up between the two opposing factions headed by Horne and Rawley. And if there was anything

the Kid learned in his wild years, it was how to deal with trouble.

He shouldered his way through it with a curt contempt for any who got in his way. Picacho City was roaring, wide open, a magnet that drew the rough, lawless element from all over the Territory —and the Kid broke up brawls with soft words and the magic of Zack Logan's name. When that wasn't enough, he backed up the implied threat with an iron will and the most dazzling gunspeed that Picacho City had ever seen. Twice he buffaloed over-bold toughs with the ejector rod of a Walker .44 carrying them off unconscious to the 'dobe jail.

That was what Picacho City had hired him for—what it wanted to see. But a tension was building that the Kid felt more and more with the passing days. The town was waiting for the showdown that was bound to come. The commissioner's court was in session, meeting behind locked doors. Everybody in the Mexican settlement knew that Judge Rawley was cooking up some kind of legal chicanery to make his grip on the town and county secure, and the rumor had gone around that it concerned taxes.

Dead-Eye Rawley, he was called. The Kid had met him that first night when Prince and his two henchmen brought him into town under cover of darkness. Huge and corpulent, looking too ungainly and slow and soft to be dangerous, the real menace of the man lay in his eyes. One of his eyes was as milky white and colorless as a chalk marble, an odd match for its penetrating black mate, and it was said that eye disconcerted his opponents in poker game and gunfights alike.

Rawley's prestige had dwindled during the fortnight since the new sheriff had taken office. To the Kid, it was the kind of grim, ugly joke that Fate had been playing on him for twenty-seven years. He could smile cynically to himself about it, but the smile had in it, too, a hint of scorn.

The town-folk, not knowing the peace officer they took such pride in was really a phony and on Rawley's payroll, believed a collision between the pair was inevitable, and waited impatiently for it. They wanted to see how the new sheriff would look with those old Walker Colts belching flame and spitting lead. From what they had heard of Zack Logan, he was a fair and fearless fighter and everything in his past stood against the kind of evil, underhanded game they were sure Rawley was plotting.

But there were some among them, notably Jubal Horne, who did not share popular confidence in the man who wore the badge in Picacho City. The gray old rancher treated the Kid with a kind of icy politeness that bordered on contempt. And the Kid, staring at his own reflection in the mirror in his living quarters in the 'dobe jail, knew that he deserved that contempt.

There were new lines of strain etched about his thin-lipped mouth. His eyes had a haunted look. He dreaded the inevitable day when his alliance with Rawley and the lawless element would become known.

FOR the first time in his life, the Kid had experienced the sense of right and implacable power that comes to a man who pins on a law badge. He liked the respect that the job gave him in the eyes of his fellow-men. If he could have severed his past and started all over again, he would have tried to atone for his wild ways by making Picacho City an honest, competent sheriff.

But how could you buck a game when the cards were all stacked against you? he asked himself bitterly. There was that old murder charge hanging over his head, and the fact that he was wearing a dead man's badge. Rawley called the tune and the Kid had to dance to it or pay the price.

More than once he thought of saddling a horse and heading for the border in the dead of night. But that wouldn't settle anything he knew. He'd been running away from trouble most of his life. Maybe if he stayed. . . .

Another week slid by. The Kid did not look in his mirror again except to shave. He dealt out the law in Picacho City with a cold eye and an impartial hand—until the hot, sultry afternoon that 'Pache Fyfe went berserk.

BECAUSE of his Indian blood, the breed couldn't handle liquor, and Sam Prince and Best kept it away from him most of the time. There was something black on the breed's soul that was grimy and unclean, and whisky brought it to the surface. Whatever it was, you could see in his little eyes that it was rotten.

The breed either bought, or stole, enough whisky that day to get crazy, howling drunk. He shot down an unarmed man in the Four-Square Saloon, barricaded the doors, and defied one and all to come in after the body. And because he was a deputy and one of Rawley's men, the town gathered to see what the new sheriff would do.

Lon Best carried the news to the Kid.

"You had Prince with you," the Kid said, his eyes narrowing to steely slits. "Why didn't you arrest him and bring him in?"

"Hell, the boss don't want him arrested," Best snorted. "We've just got to hustle him out of town for a while until this thing blows over. He's too valuable a man to lose."

So the Kid had his orders before he even left his office. He snugged his guns to the proper slant, put on his hat, and walked back up the street with Best. Picacho City was high on the side of the mountain in the pines, but a slow, hot wind threaded up from the desert and a blazing sun sucked resin from the boardwalk under their feet. The street looked deserted, but the Kid knew there were watchful eyes behind every door and window.

They came to the hotel porch, where Sam Prince waited. The Four-Square was just around the corner. Maniacal laughter echoed from the saloon. There was a flurry of shots as the whisky-crazed breed fired at the swinging lamps and bottles behind the bar and anything else that caught his fancy.

The Kid stood in the street and counted those shots. When the breed's gun was empty, he went in after 'Pache Fyfe. H brought him out over his shoulder, in handcuffs, with blood dripping from his greasy black hair to the dust to show where the sheriff had slammed him over the head with the long barrel of one of his Walker Colt's.

It happened so fast, and so easily, that 'Pache Fyfe was in jail before the town recovered from its stunned surprise. But the effortless ease with which he had subdued the breed only added to the new lawman's stature in the eyes of the town. It was what they had expected of Zack Logan. It fitted in with the legend that had been built around him—the swashbuckling legend that he wore with the same calm assurance that he wore the gleaming marshal's star.

And old Jubal Horne, who was in town that day, unbent enough to go in and shake the Kid's hand.

"Maybe I had you figured wrong, Logan," he said grudgingly. "But after what happened out there, I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. You've got my backing any time you want it."

"I'm obliged," answered the Kid, and stared at the door for a long, moody interval after Horne had left. He couldn't help but like the dour, honest, outspoken old cowman. He knew what a bitter pill it had been for Horne to swallow his pride and come here. But the thing that stirred uneasy foreboding in the Cochise Kid was the fact that he didn't really deserve the rancher's respect. . . .

IT WAS late at night when Sam Prince entered the office without knocking. His gaudy sombrero rode the back of his head and there was a cranky malice in his slitted green eyes. The Kid seldom saw him without a cigarette in his mouth, the smoke curling under his gold-spangled hat brim.

"The boss wants to see you," said Prince. "Lon will take care of things here."

They left the office and went down an alley to the rear of the courthouse. Judge Rawley was waiting at his desk.

"Sam tells me you still have 'Pache in jail," he said without preliminaries.

The Kid nodded.

"Turn him loose," Rawley ordered, his tone harsh and overbearing. "I'll post his bail. I'll have Whitey Burke draw up the necessary papers for his release in the morning."

He leaned back in his chair and looked at the Kid with a frown of annoyance on his flabby face.

"If you cross me, Kid," he warned, "I'll see that Horne and his bunch learn of Zack Logan's death. There'll be evidence planted at the marshal's grave to show that you killed him. So you'll play along with me—or else!"

The Kid left. He hadn't said a word during the interview with Rawley, but a bitter, twisted smile was on his lips as he went down the stairs ahead of the grinning Prince. . . .

When he returned to the jail, Lon Best had already turned 'Pache Fyfe loose. And the next morning, the county knew the kind of taxes that Judge Rawley and the commissioner's court meant to impose on them.

OLD JUBAL HORNE stormed into the sheriff's office with one of the notices in his hand. He flung it on the Kid's desk, his faded eyes blazing.

"So that's what you coyotes have been cookin' up," he charged, almost beside himself with rage. "Retroactive grazing taxes that no cowman in the country can pay! It'll bankrupt every one of us. Then Rawley can take over our ranches one by one for non-payment of taxes, and secure title by swearing he's paid off what ag'in 'em."

"If it's legal," he said tonelessly, "I'll enforce it. I'll do my duty, Horne."

Icy fury burned in Jubal Horne's slitted eyes. "Duty, hell!" he ground out. "You're sidin' them in this steal. I may be an old man, but I can still use my guns. I can shoot a snake when I see one. That means you and your two-bit deputies had better keep off my range!"

The Kid's smile was twisted as he watched the old man leave. If there was any way he could, he meant to help the cowmen in their fight against Rawley.

AND about all the trouble he could make, the way the Kid looked at it, was for himself!

When he buckled on his old Walker Colt's a little later, to go to the courthouse and confer with Rawley and his henchmen, he found that a change had come over the town. The men he met on the street either avoided his glance or spoke to him curtly, and a few let him see the scorn and contempt in their eyes.

The morning wore on, and the Kid could feel the tension like a mounting wind. Definitely he felt it.

Shortly after noon the stage from Roswell rattled into town and pulled up in front of the Settler's Trading Post in a smother of dust. The Kid was on hand to meet it.

A drummer climbed out of the stage, carrying two leather valises. The Kid looked him over casually. Then the driver helped the remaining passenger down, and the Kid's breath caught in his throat.

IT was a girl. She was wearing a hat and when she lifted the veil, her hair was honey-thick and framed her face and neck in soft waves. She had on a gray traveling suit, close-fitting at the waist and bosom, and her pale beauty surpassed any the Kid had ever seen.

He realized that he was staring foolishly, and felt awkward and embarrassed as he took off his sweat-stained old hat.

"Are you the marshal here?" she asked, glimpsing the badge on his shirt.

"I—I'm the law here, yes, ma'am," he blurted out. "Is there anything I can do for you, ma'am?"

"There is," she said, still smiling. "You can tell me where to find the sheriff. I'm Julie Logan. Zack Logan is my brother."

The Kid's blood froze in his veins.

"You—*you're Julie Logan?*"

"Yes, I am," she said, and worry came

to her eyes for the first time. "Why? Is there anything wrong?"

"No, ma'am," said the Kid mechanically, but everything was wrong. Icy fingers of dread curled around his heart, squeezing it dry.

"You just wait here, ma'am," he told her, as calmly as he could: "Zack is out on a job right now. I'll get word to him that you're here, and he'll be in soon."

His clearest thought, as he went along the street, was that he had to find a horse and ride hard out of there. And as he walked along, trying not to hurry, he had the blackest moment that had ever come to him.

A man can go just so far and then he comes to the end of his rope. The Cochise Kid figured he'd come to the end of his rope and found a noose in it: If he stayed, he would hang. If he headed for the border, she would take that as irrevocable proof of his guilt. Either way he was licked, and knew it. He was as heartsick and desperate as a man can be as he walked away from the jail.

He was almost to the Four-Square before he noticed how thoroughly quiet and empty the sunlit street was. Half a block away a rider on a buckskin horse was jogging slowly into town. The rider was 'Pache Fyfe. At the end of his catch-rope followed a lead horse, carrying a grim burden.

This was a dead man, thrown across the saddle and tied there like a sack of grain. His head hung down and his arms hung down and there was a smear of blood on the stirrup-leather from the bullet-hole in his head. Even at that distance, the Kid recognized Jubal Horne.

IT was a shock like a slap in the face, and it stopped him in his tracks. He knew he should grab the first horse he came to and head out of town, if he wanted to make good his escape. And yet something held him back. Part of it was the hard, jarring rage that came over him, the gall-bitter realization that his own helplessness to halt Rawley's scheme had cost a fine old man his life.

And part of it was the girl. Her coming had changed everything for the Kid. And suddenly he knew that he was weary to the core of running away from trouble. Come what may, he would see this through. Fate had made him the butt of a grisly joke once too often. He was wearing a dead man's badge and it would be a macabre twist to that joke if he played the dead man's hand out.

It was like a crushing weight lifted from his shoulders. And what happened after that made a fitting last chapter to the career of a lawman who already ranked with Stumbling Joe Bledsoe and Wyatt Earp. For the man that Picacho City knew as Zack Logan, the sheriff they all thought had sold them out, stepped suddenly to the street's dust in front of the half-breed Apache.

"You're under arrest," he rapped out. "And this time it's a murder charge I'll make stick, 'Pache!"

The breed glanced over his shoulder, at the horsemen who were just wheeling into the street. Sam Prince and Lon Best and two special deputies came riding toward them.

"You can't 'rest me," he growled. "It self-defense. He draw on me first."

The Kid shook his head. "It won't stand up, 'Pache. You got him before he had time to reach home. *And he wasn't wearing a gun when he left my office!*"

The others, as if scenting trouble, fanned out across the street as they came on. Prince read the scene at a glance, and used his voice on the Kid.

"What's the matter with you, Logan? Yon gone loco or something? You can't arrest a man for doing his duty!"

Again the Kid shook his head. "The jig's up, Prince," he said thinly. "I'm through with your crooked game. From now on I'm playing this a dead man's way. I'm takin' 'Pache in."

"The hell I can't!" snarled Prince. "You try making that stick and I'll see you hung for—"

That was as far as he got, for the breed chose that moment to make his play. His right hand smashed for the black gun at his hip.

NOBODY ever knew exactly how it happened. A hundred pair of eyes watched the scene from cover, but none saw the Kid make his draw. There were some among them who even claimed that he already had a gun in his hand.

But he didn't. As Sam Prince had said, he was faster than Zack Logan ever was—and he ripped out a Walker Colt's and put a bullet through the breed before the barrel of the black gun ever tilted up. 'Pache Fyfe was dead in the saddle as his finger jerked spasmodically at the trigger.

Lon Best had a saddle gun across his lap. He swung it up with an oath, but he never fired it. The rifle slid to the ground as he lifted both hands to the spurting wound where the Kid's second bullet sliced through his throat.

The horses were crow-hopping, and dust and black, oily powder-smoke obscured the scene. A slug ripped into the Kid's chest, knocking him half around. Pain like white-hot needles stabbed all through his chest and left side. He couldn't suck wind into his tortured lungs. It took all of his remaining strength to prong back the hammer and notch his sights on the nearest deputy. The hammer fell and the gun kicked back against his palm, and the deputy went down.

The second deputy had seen enough. He jerked his horse around and made some fast tracks out of there. That left Sam Prince to face the Kid alone, and the green-eyed killer had no stomach for a fight unless the odds were all in his favor. He flung a last wild shot at the Kid, and hurled himself into the Four-Square Saloon.

THE KID ran limping after him. His shirt was blood-wet and sharp, shooting pain tore all through his chest and side.

He shoved through the swinging doors of the saloon and a bullet dug splinters from the door frame inches from his head. He saw Sam Prince's tall figure duck through a door in back, and sent a shot after him. He ran through the saloon into the alley, and Sam Prince was ahead of him, disappearing through the back door of the courthouse.

There was no wariness in the Kid, and little feeling except that raking pain.

Plunging through the door, the Kid started up the stairs. A gun crashed like a cannon in the narrow confines of the stairway, and the sound seemed to hurl him back. His right leg felt like someone had tried to knock it from under him with an axe. Gripping the railing for support, he looked up and saw Sam Prince's lean, handsome face, twisted with fear and maniacal fury.

Prince threw a second slug at him, and missed. But the Kid didn't. His shot was little more than reflex, the instinctive urge for survival. The bullet seemed to snatch away all of Sam Prince's impulses. For a moment his leaden eyes continued to glare at the Kid over the levelled sights of his smoking six-gun. Then his legs straightened convulsively, lifting him up, and he broke at the knees and neck and waist and came tumbling over the balustrade to crash on the stairs beside the Kid.

He went on up the stairs, gripping the railing with his good hand and dragging his wounded leg.

He went along the hall to Rawley's office. The door was open. He stood for a moment, breathing raggedly as he waited for his strength to return. And when he went through the door he was moving fast, sliding along the wall, with his gun up and ready for a lightning shot. But he never pulled the trigger.

Julie Logan was in the office. Rawley had her in front of him, partially shielding his huge bulk. He had a pistol in his hand and he used his voice on the Kid like a club.

"All right, drop that gun, you impostor! This young lady says you're not Zack Logan—that the marshal was her brother. I thought all along there was something phony about you. Now I know. You'll hang for Logan's murder, blast you!"

The Kid dropped the gun. He tried not to look at Julie Logan.

"You thought you were putting something over on somebody," gloated Rawley, with triumph in his oddly-matched eyes and a double meaning in his tone. He let his brutal satisfaction have full play. "But as soon as I tell that crowd you murdered Logan, you'll be a dead killer swinging at the end of a rope—waiting for the buzzards to pick at your eyes!"

THE sound out there swelled, and the Kid had heard it before. A mob was forming. His first headlong rush into the room had carried him nearly to the window, and through it he could see a tight knot of men around the horse that carried old Jubal Horne. When the knot broke up, one of the men was waving over his head the rope that had been used to lash the rancher's body to the saddle.

"Come on!" the man howled. "Let's finish the job while we're at it!"

The Kid looked at Rawley and smiled grimly.

"There's just one thing about it," he said quietly. "I'll have company. They're coming after you, Judge!"

Rawley wilted as if someone had kicked him hard in his huge belly.

"You've got just seconds to act," the Kid told him in that same quiet, inexorable tone. "I'm the only one that can save you—for the law. So tell Miss Julie who really killed her brother. Write it on a piece of paper and sign your name to it. Hangin' won't go easy with you, Rawley. You're too fat. A rope would just about jerk your head off your shoulders!"

Rawley seemed too stunned and terror-stricken to move. "Don't—let—them get me!" he gasped. "I—I could never hang! I know—I'm too big." He shuddered and collapsed into a chair. The Kid grabbed a pen and paper and shoved it toward him, but his hands were shaking too much for him to even hold the pen.

"Don't let them—get me!" he almost sobbed. "Sam Prince shot Zack Logan! I'll tell everything!"

"Tell her I had nothing to do with it," the Kid went on remorselessly. "Tell her I was framed into posing as her brother."

Julie Logan took the pen and paper. In a few broken, disjointed sentences, Rawley poured out the story, and she took everything down. The Kid told him to sign it. He did, just as the first of the mob reached the top of the stairs and came along the hallway to the door.

The Kid turned to meet them. He had his gun in his hand. He had, as the doctor said later, more holes in him than a widow woman's sieve, but he faced them with that quiet determination that had made them respect him that first day.

"I'm the law here, gents. This man is my prisoner—unless somebody craves to object."

And he made it stick. He even rounded up Whitey Burke, who was hiding under his desk, and had both prisoners safely in jail before he collapsed from sheer weakness and had to be carried off to the doctor's office.

IT was night when he opened his eyes on a cool room, dimly lit by a candle near his bedside, and on the face of a lovely girl bending over him.

"Why did you come?" he managed.

"I knew something was wrong when I got that letter from Zack," Julie Logan told him. "I knew he would never have killed the Cochise Kid and left him buried in an unmarked grave. You see, he'd uncovered evidence to prove the Kid's innocence. That's why he wanted so desperately to track the Kid down.

"But who are you?" she asked, softly. "I know most of the story, and I know you did a fine thing today—the way Zack would have done it if he'd lived. But I still don't know who you are."

"That's easy, Julie," smiled the Kid, and reached for her hand. "I'm the gent who's been waiting for you all of his life. I'm the man you're going to marry."

That's why, when the rumor started later that Zack Logan was dead, you could find so many people in New Mexico who would deny it. The marshal, they would tell you, had retired and was living somewhere in Texas under another name, with a very pretty wife he'd married there. . . .

# ONCE A TIN-STAR

## By LEE FLOREN

**Texas was a long way off from Wyoming territory, but the lawman remembered that hate meant hot lead anywhere in the West . . . .**

HARSH words ripped Whisker Malone's attention from the boots he was mending. He hobbled to the door, awl in hand.

"Gimme a hand, Whiskers."

The old cobbler hurried toward the stage as fast as he could with his bad leg. He turned once, flicked his awl out, and the long awl stuck in a log of his shoe repair shop.

"What the devil happened, Windy?"

"Hold-up men! Hit us out by Rimrock Bridge! Shot Ike here through the guts!"

Men were coming out of the Stockman House. Heads were popping out of business houses along Muddy Rock's main street. Passengers were emerging from the stage.

"Be careful," Windy advised. "Ike, get your feet on that step. Whiskers, hang onto his boots to steady him."

Ike Newton's face was the color of dirty buckskin. Sheriff Ed Smith was beside Whiskers Malone now. They got Ike down on his feet.

"Can you walk, Ike?" Whiskers asked.

Ike grunted, "I can try." He kept his hand pressed against his belly. Whiskers and a townsman got him to the steps of the Stockman House before the guard's knees gave out. They carried him into the lobby and laid him on the bench.

"Wonder who did it, and why?" Whiskers asked.

Ike didn't answer. "Where's the doc?"

Doc Standifer came on the run. The hotel clerk said he'd help the doc. Whiskers looked at Ike Newton's pale face and fear speared through him. Ike was bad wounded.

He hobbled outside, a thick-shouldered man of almost sixty, bent to the demands of his calling. Windy was talking with Sheriff Ed Smith. Whiskers Malone heard the stage-driver's angry words.

"They stopped us in the buttes right alongside the bridge. Three men, masked, on horses that had brands smeared over by pitch to hide them. They said, 'Where's that dinero?' and I said, 'They ain't none.' We never carried any money. Only the passengers and their luggage."

"Then what?"

"This tall gink holds his rifle on me an' Ike Newton, then his two *compadres* go through the boot and the stage. Never touched the passengers."

"Then what?"

"Of course, they never found no dinero. So out of sheer meanness this tall jigger just shoots Ike through the belly!"

"Get some hosses, men!" Sheriff Ed Smith roared. "We head out that way pronto. Get rifles an' short-guns an' ca'tridges!"

The lawman ran toward his barn behind his office.

"Is Mr. Newton—hurt bad, Whiskers?"

Jessie Stone's face showed her anxiety. Hers was a pretty face, not beautiful, but wholesome and strong and clean. She was wholesome, too, in her neat housedress, and little white apron.

"I don't know, Jessie."

She looked at the hotel. "I sure hope not." Her brown eyes came back to Whiskers Malone. "I wonder why they held up a stage that common-sense would tell them had no money?"

Whiskers was pondering that point, too. He knew that the stage occasionally carried currency through to Muddy

Rock. Of course, word might have reached bandits that this particular day the stage would carry currency.

The gun-guard always rode the stage, regardless of whether a money-shipment was coming through or not. That was one of the requirements of the stage company's insurance backers.

"Wonder if any money was supposed to come through?" Jessie asked.

Whiskers Malone looked toward the Muddy Rock Bank. Two men had left that establishment. They hurried toward the stage One was middle-aged, squat and wide; the other was slender and about twenty-three.

The middle-aged man asked roughly. "What happened?"

Whiskers Malone did not like Banker Glen Payson. And his dislike showed in his words. "I'm not the town sheriff, Payson."

Payson spoke savagely. "The devil with you, you old cobbler." He went inside the Stockman House.

"He's mad," Jessie said.

The younger man stopped beside Whiskers. He asked what had happened and the cobbler told him.

"Was there money supposed to come through, Frank?" Jennie asked.

Frank Gruwell hesitated. "I—I don't knew, Jessie."

Jessie said, angrily, "You're getting to be a typical banker. Close-mouthed and unfriendly." She turned and walked into the Steer Horn Cafe.

Frank Gruwell looked at Whiskers Malone. The bank-clerk rubbed his smooth-shaven jaw.

"Now what's wrong with her?"

"You'll have to ask her," Whiskers Malone said curtly.

Gruwell glanced at the Steer Horn. "Never can tell about the weather or a woman." He entered the Stockman House.

Whiskers Malone returned to his cobbler shop. When he hobbled through the door he took his long awl out of the log. Soon riders boiled by, dust flinging, as Sheriff Ed Smith and his posse headed for Rimrock Bridge.

"They couldn't catch a mud-turtle bogged in gumbo," old Whiskers Malone grunted to his boot-last.

A MAN'S memory is like a camera. It makes clean images and pictures. But unlike a camera the mind retains impressions. Certain pictures stand out more clearly and are remembered forever.

The tall man had stood over Whiskers Malone as he cobbled. "You remin' me of a gent I seen onct or twice down in Texas."

Whiskers had not looked up. "Never been in Texas, stranger."

The man had been lanky with loose lips. Wind and rain and his manner of living had etched bleak lines on his face.

"You sure remind me of him. Of course, I was a button then. Down below Lubbock, the gent was."

Whiskers had pegged down a nail. "Coincidence, I reckon. What was this gent's handle? You kinda got me interested, now."

"Lawman down there. Name of Tim Martin."

Whiskers Malone was glad the tall jigger couldn't see his face. He kept his head close to his work, pretending his eyes were bad, and he was almighty glad he had grown a full beard.

"Never have heard of this Martin gent. Course, it's a long ways from Texas to northern Wyomin' territory."

"This Martin star-badge killed my cousin. Shot him through the back. He run out, then; hell, that was almost twenty years back."

Whiskers clinched another nail. He hoped his hands had not shaken too much. But his hands always shook. Old age and rheumatism.

"Here's your boots, cowboy."

The tall man with the hard face ran a long forefinger over the end of the half-sole. "You got it right smooth, old man. One time I had a pair of boots cobbled down in New Mexico territory an' the cobbler left the end of the sole rough. Hoss dumped me over on the

Strip an' I got hung up on that half-sole."

"Poor cobbler, fella."

The man had paid and walked out. Later Whiskers Malone had learned his name was Roy Haynes. He had come into Muddy Rock two weeks before and had looked for a job riding, so he said. But the local cow-outfits had full crews. Still, Haynes stuck around town.

But his visit, and his words, had left Whiskers Malone with a pallid skin under the dark protection of his beard.

"Almost twenty years ago," he had murmured.

Drifters came and went through Muddy Rock. They would stay a while, then pull out. About that time, two other riders came in. No jobs for them, either. They had let word drop they were returning to Texas from a cattle-drive into the Powder River country.

Evidently they seemed in no hurry to push south. They sat around the saloons and played cards but neither drank much.

Whiskers Malone had watched them. Deep inside of him tinkled a little bell of warning. Now he was remembering three men had held up the Muddy Rock Stage. And the tall jigger had shot Ike Newton.

He couldn't work. He flipped his awl against the wall.

OUTSIDE, sunlight was bright. He saw Doc Standifer leave the Stockman House. "How is Ike, doc?"

"Bad."

Whiskers asked, shakily, "Ike's got a wife an' two babies. He's the right best pal I've had. You got to pull him through, Doc."

"I can only do my best."

The medico went to his office. Young Frank Gruwell left the hotel. "Well, got to get back in the dark cage, Whiskers, and get to work."

"Hope the sheriff has some luck."

"I do, too."

Old Whiskers Malone watched the young man until he entered the bank. Mingled emotions tugged through him and pulled down his lips in thought. Where did Frank Gruwell stand in this?

Frank Gruwell and Jessie Stone. . . . They were to be married. The day had not been set, but the town had considered Jessie a lucky girl to get Frank, who everybody said was up and coming. Gruwell had come into Muddy Rock about four months ago and immediately gotten work in the bank. The townspeople and local range-folks liked the young banker.

But Whiskers Malone had remembered things. Frank Gruwell and the lanky, quiet Roy Haynes playing cards in the Mint Saloon. All alone, at one table, talking in a low voice. And Whiskers had watched them through the back-bar mirror, something warning him inside.

He had based this warning upon his old lawman training. Once a tin-star, and you were always a tin-star.

One morning at sunup he'd seen Roy Haynes and the two other drifters ride into Muddy Rock. The hour was so early that the rest of the town was still in bed. That had struck him odd. Around town they never spoke much to each other.

He had given this fleeting thought, but that noon word came through that the stage had been hit across the basin at Wisdom. But a lawman is always suspicious. His calling demands suspicion.

Roy Haynes came down the street and entered the Broken Boot Saloon. Whiskers drifted that way. One of the other drifters—Pinto Jefferson—was in the saloon, too. Whiskers took his morning eye-opener and covertly watched them. But no visible sign of recognition passed between them.

Frank Gruwell came in. "Drink, Haynes?"

"Don't mind if I do."

Gruwell looked at Whiskers. "You too, Malone?"

"Had my mornin' shot, thanks."

Whiskers Malone returned to his cobbler's bench. But his mind was not on his work. He added the whole thing up. One of his best pals lay in the hotel,

shot through the belly. Jessie Stone's brown eyes haunted him. Jessie loved Frank Gruwell and things didn't look good for the young banker. Whiskers found himself wishing he knew something about Frank Gruwell's past years.

He was sure that Roy Haynes was openly suspicious of him. He knew that when the time was ripe Haynes would ride his gun against him. The past and its many years were heavy on old Whiskers Malone.

He had figured he had moved far enough away from Lubbock. He'd figured that the years had healed the old wound of that Texas range-war. But hate, and family ties, are odd things to some men. Some men never forget hate or their assumed obligations to their relatives.

Roy Haynes was a man of this type.

He knew, for sure, he was in danger. But what was holding Roy Haynes back from calling his hand and shooting it out with him? That had puzzled him for some days. Haynes seemed to be waiting for something. Then, with it behind him, he'd match his gun against the gun of Whiskers Malone.

THE old cobbler looked at his trembling, heavy-knuckled hand. He was no gunman any longer. He tried to keep back his ironic smile; he couldn't. He was in danger, his friend Ike Newton had been seriously wounded in a wanton shooting-scrape, and Jessie Stone. . . .

He remembered something else, too.

He had got out of bed before sunrise this morning. And much to his surprise, he had seen a horsebacker ride up to Banker Glen Payson's small house, behind the bank. He had recognized the man as a deputy out of the sheriff's office over at Wisdom.

The man had untied a sack from his saddle and knocked and awakened the banker. Then he and Payson had gone into the bank. When the deputy had come out, the sack had been empty.

"My boss figgered it best I rode out with it," the deputy had said.

Whiskers had watched, wondering what was up. The local cow outfits were finishing spring-roundup and soon would have to pay off their crews. Each man was paid in cash. The old cobbler figured this deputy had taken over a sack of currency from the Wisdom bank so that Banker Payson could meet the cowman's demands.

Now he matched this against the holdup of the stage. And the stage holdup made sense. Somebody had tipped off Roy Haynes and his men the money was coming through. Coming through on the stage.

But instead, the Wisdom sheriff had smuggled it through at night, by horseback. And whoever had warned Haynes had not had time to see Haynes again and correct the error in his information.

So, unaware of their mistake, Haynes and his long riders had held up the stage. Disappointed, angry over the mistake, Haynes had deliberately let Ike Newton have it . . . through the belly.

But who had warned Roy Haynes and his men?

With a cold hand clutching his belly, old Whiskers Malone remembered the times he had seen young Frank Gruwell talking with Roy Haynes. And Jennie Stone's brown eyes, at that moment, were filled with terror and fear.

A woman stood in the doorway of his shop. She was middle-aged, but time had not dimmed the luster in her blue eyes. A little boy of five was with her.

"How's Ike, Mrs. Newton?"

"Doc Standifer says he has a long hard climb ahead of him." She had cried once, he knew, but now her eyes were fire. "Who do you think they were, Whiskers?"

He looked up sharply. "How would I know?"

"You watch this town carefully. You get up early and go to bed late."

Whiskers thought, "Lord, is it that apparent!" Aloud he said, "Probably some drifters ridin' through. Saw the stage and wondered if there was anything of value on it."

"But they didn't rob the passengers."

So she had added that fact in, too.

"Looks to me," Whiskers said quietly,

"that they got rattled and after Ike got shot, they got scared and drifted."

"That might be it," she said.

The little boy said, "Let's go home, mummy." He was a child and tragedy did not affect him.

"I'd just like to know," Mrs. Newton said.

Whiskers watched Ike Newton's wife and son go toward home. He went to the livery-barn. Roy Haynes' bronc was there; so were the horses of his two friends. The hosteler was gone.

He looked at the brands on the three cayuses. The brands were clean and the broncs did not look leg-weary. He felt of the brands with his gnarled fingers. There had been no pitch smeared over them.

But Haynes and his gunmen would not use these horses for a holdup. They were too smart for that. Evidently they had broncs cached out in the badlands. They had ridden out to these horses, saddled them and smeared brands with pitch, and then, the holdup over, had ridden their old cayuses back to town.

THEY were smart. They had to be smart. Their risky calling demanded brains. But old Whiskers Malone had matched brains—and guns—with outlaws before.

Roy Haynes' cousin had been drinking in the Red River Bar. Odd, even after twenty years, he remembered even the name of the saloon. This cousin had seen Whiskers enter the bar. Watched him in the back-bar mirror.

Whiskers had stopped, legs wide. "Turn around, son, and put your hands up! Keep your hands off that gun—!"

The man had whirled, already crouched, and his gun had winked. But Whiskers' bullet had beaten him. His bullet had caught him as he had turned and killed him. He had not shot Roy Haynes' cousin through the back.

But the sight of the young man, lying there dead, had changed Whiskers Malone. It had sickened him. Even the law-trail was not worth this, he had thought. He had holstered his gun, ridden out of town, headed north. He had grown his beard and changed his name.

At Muddy Rock he had known almost two decades of happiness. Here nobody knew he had once been a town-tamer. Now that happiness, and the happiness of Jennie Stone, of the Newtons, was in jeopardy.

A man said, "Howdy, old man."

Whiskers turned quickly. Frank Gruwell had entered the barn, the soft powdery manure quiet under his boots.

"Lookin' to see if my hoss had plenty of hay, Frank. This light was bad an' I thought this bay was my bay."

"That's Pinto Jefferson's bronc."

"So I notice, now."

Whiskers' eyes were shrewd in the semi-darkness. He wished he could clearly see Frank Gruwell's eyes. But the dim light made that impossible. He went to his own horse, patted him on the rump, and dug into the manger.

"Got plenty of hay."

"Wonder if he's grained my cayuse." Gruwell went down the corridor. Whiskers watched him pour oats out of a sack into the feed-bin. They walked back up-town together.

"You an' Jennie set the date yet, Frank?"

"Not yet."

"You'd better marry her pronto. She's the world's best, I think. Somebody might beat you to her."

Frank Gruwell smiled. "I'll have to chance that."

Whiskers stood in his shop-door and watched the man go to the bank. Frank Gruwell, he reasoned, had a reason for going to that barn. Was it only to grain his horse?

The cobbler could never remember Gruwell going to the barn before to check on his cayuse's grain. Of course, there was a first time for everything. But a cold hunch, coming from deep inside, told him maybe Gruwell had seen him hit for the barn. And the young bank clerk had followed to check on him.

That meant that Roy Haynes had tipped Frank Gruwell off as to the real identity of one Whiskers Malone, Muddy

Rock cobbler. It could mean nothing else. The belly muscle on Whiskers' belly tightened into knots. He was in this deep, and if he stayed in Muddy Rock, a gun would spell the answer.

And the old days, with bitter memories, lay like a terrible weight across his stooped shoulders.

He hobbled inside. His leg, for some reason, seemed worse than usual, and he wished, vaguely, that the doc, years ago, had done a better job, after that shoot-out in Dalhart with the Pecos Kid and Wild Mike Calloway. He got his stool, found his Meyers' sewing-awl, and went to work.

But first he put his gun—a .38—under his belt, the butt covered by the folds of his blue shirt. He heard boots stop in his doorway.

"Got those chaps sewed up, Whiskers?"

He looked up at the Loop P cowboy. "You're a day ahead of time, fella. But I got them fixed. Over there on that hook."

Boots crossed the worn floor. "Got our gather done a day ahead of time. Poor gather over on Shotgun Crick. Tomorrow the pool roundup boys come into town for their pay."

THAT meant, then, by tomorrow night the money would be out of the bank, drawn out by the ranchers to pay their hands. Whiskers added this all up and found an answer in it.

"The sheriff is wild as a rabbit that's set on some turpentine. He come into Shotgun Crick an' tried to deputize the round-up crew but the boss would have no truck with him."

"Where'd Ed Smith go then?"

"Headed into Wisdom to get word to the sheriff there. Between the two of them they aim to sweep the country. Reckon he'll be gone for a day or so, anyhow. Mebby longer."

The cowboy buckled his chaps and left. Whiskers Malone listened to his receding boots and punched his awl into a half-sole. The Donald boy would need his shoes by evening. School was letting out and the kids were giving a reception for the townspeople.

He punched, sewed, looped his thread and pulled it tight. The stage was set, and a good job had been done. Sheriff Ed White out on the range with some of the men of Muddy Rock; come evening the rest of the men would be at the schoolhouse. And the money, if it was going to be lifted from the bank, would have to go out tonight, for by tomorrow it would be in the hands of cowpunchers.

A woman asked, "Just about through, Whiskers?"

He did not look up. "Give me time, Mrs. Donald."

A nice laugh. "But I'm not Mrs. Donald."

He looked up. Jessie Stone stood in the doorway. Again he got the impression of her wholesomeness, but in this was a lot of woman. This showed in her brown eyes and the smooth contour of her firm jaw.

"Chuck ready, Jessie?"

"All ready, Whiskers. I fried you a T-Bone. Lots of frenchfries, too. Better come before it gets cold."

"Be right along."

He finished the shoes in a few minutes, tied the laces, hung them on the hook. He did not lock his shop. Many times people left work in the shop when he was eating. He hobbled down the street, the .38 an unfamiliar weight inside his wide belt under his shirt.

One of Haynes' men sat on a stool eating. Whiskers knew his name was Mike Raleigh and he nodded briefly at him. The man returned the nod silently. Whiskers hobbled back to the kitchen where Jessie had his supper on the table. The cook grumbled as he cleaned his stove.

"Danged woman wants this place so danged clean it's a sin."

"Women are that way, they tell me."

"They'd have to *tell* you. No woman in her right mind would marry you."

"You're still single, I notice."

This was an old joke between them. The cook seemed to feel better after the

barter of words. The meal was a good one, but Whiskers' appetite was not in it. Jessie came through the swinging-doors from the dining-room.

"You watch the front," she told the cook. "I want to eat with Whiskers."

"Where's Frank?"

"He had to work late at the bank, I guess." She looked at him sharply. "What's the matter with you? Lose your appetite?"

"You're feast enough for me."

"Ah, shaw! Try something new. For your eyes, yes, but how about your insides? They can't live on beauty."

Whiskers dragged his knife through the tender steak. Frank Gruwell was missing a real meal.

"Going to the schoolhouse reception?" Jessie asked.

"Reckon so. You an' Frank goin'?"

"I'm going. Frank says if he gets done soon enough, he'll meet me there."

"I'll escort you there."

Her eyes twinkled. "Well, now, Romeo, that's swell of you."

THE schoolhouse was filling up when they arrived. Kids looked out of place with their knee-pants and shiny faces.

He noticed Banker Glen Payson was present. The program started and he excused himself and went out. Jessie, he knew, was puzzled.

But the sign, he knew, was right.

His tongue had a bitter taste and it was not from his chewing tobacco. Frank Gruwell was in on this. He'd ride out with Haynes and his gang and Jessie would be left alone to the town and its bitter tongues of gossip. And Ike Newton lay in the hotel, shot through the belly, while his daughter Sary was being graduated from the eighth grade.

He checked at the livery barn. The hostler was at the schoolhouse. The horses of Haynes and Jefferson and Raleigh were saddled and bridled and stood in the stalls with the bridle-reins wrapped around the manger-posts. One quick jerk would free those reins.

He did not go into the darkened barn far enough to see Frank Gruwell's bronc in the back. He figured it would be saddled and bridled, too. He was cold inside, and nervous.

From the schoolhouse came the sweet sound of a violin. That would be Sonny Bowern, the sixth-grader. He hurried toward the bank, going down the alley. Haynes and Gruwell would make their break down this alley, he figured.

He swung between two buildings, got to the front of a henhouse and, with great difficulty, climbed on top the flat roof. He was panting when he reached its dark top, not so much from exertion as from excitement. He wormed forward, came to the edge next to the alley. Below him, chickens clucked suddenly. He had scared them. He expected them to quiet down but now and then one clucked and flapped its wings.

They seemed excited, too.

He laid a row of .38 shells out in front of him. Then he put the .38 beside them and waited. The violin kept playing, a dim quiet sound because of the distance. It was not soothing, though.

TIME dragged by on a windbroken horse. Once he heard the front door of the bank slam. There was a space on each side of the bank between that establishment and the adjoining buildings. He watched these, for he could see the mainstreet with its dim street-lights through them. But no man moved across either.

Below him, a hen clucked suddenly, noisy on her roost. Maybe that was caused by the three men who had just entered the alley, two from the north, one from the south.

The shadows met, converged, and made a dark blot at the rear door of the bank. The door opened slowly and silently from inside. Whiskers caught the glimpse of the money-sack, then the door was closed, and somebody whispered coarsely, "Make it out fast. I'll give you twenty minutes an' then make out like I broke outa my ropes and just got loose to warn the town."

Whiskers couldn't make out the iden-

tities of the men. It was too dark. He waited, trembling inside, until the trio had moved away from the bank door. Then, when they had broken from the dark ball and became individuals, he spoke hoarsely.

"That's far enough! Every man jack of you stop right in your tracks! An' up with your hands!"

They turned, stared up at the henhouse. One said raspingly, "Somebody on that roof!"

"I know that voice!" Roy Haynes snarled the words. "That's the ol' cobbler, that Whiskers—"

Whiskers knew they would never surrender peacefully. One crouched, and, before his gun could wink, the .38 had knocked him down. Gun-flame smashed out from the rear of the bank.

A bullet ripped the eave in front of Whiskers. He had three shells left, and they took toll. He counted them, and realized his gun was empty. And still, Roy Haynes was on his feet.

Below him, hens cackled and flapped. He fumbled his shells, cramming them in. Only then was he aware a man was below him, shooting through the henhouse window.

Roy Haynes tried to run, got a few feet, and fell flat. By this time Whiskers had cartridges in the .38.

"Who's up there?" a voice called from the henhouse.

Whiskers Malone doubted his ears. "This is me, Whiskers. Frank, is that you? I thought you—"

Frank Gruwell climbed out the henhouse window, breaking it with his gun. "What the hell you doin' here?"

DESPITE the distance to the ground, Whiskers Malone made the jump. He landed on all fours like an old cat, gun still in his hand. Cobwebs hung to Frank Gruwell's suit and his pants were torn at the knee.

"Who in the devil is that over by the door?"

"You make the guess." Gruwell went to Haynes, gun up. He rolled him over. "This gent is dead."

He gulped, whispered, "Banker Glen Payson. He—he was at the schoolhouse. He—he tried to rob his own bank. He sneaked back an' come in the front door!"

"This gent is dead, too." Frank Gruwell walked from Mike Raleigh to Pinto Jefferson. "Payson alive?"

"Yeah, he's alive."

"He's got a prison sentence ahead of him," Gruwell said grimly. "Jefferson is as dead as a cinch-ring." He stood up and looked at Whiskers Malone. "I figured you was wise to this."

"How?"

"This afternoon when I caught you in the barn. Me, I'd gone down there to check on those brands, too, to see if there had been pitch smeared on them."

Whiskers Malone nodded. "I had you wrong, Frank; dead wrong. You knew this was comin', huh?"

Whiskers Malone understood a lot, now. "You played up to Haynes, huh? Hell, I thought you were the inside man."

"You guessed wrong there, Whiskers. I tried to worm into Haynes' confidence. I got suspicious one night I saw Haynes sneak into Payson's shack an' talk with him. Payson's bank is hard put."

Whiskers nodded, again. Seemed like all he could do was stand and nod. "Payson would collect insurance on this robbery and then get a cutback, too. But he missed when he figured that dinero would come through on the stage instead of by hossback."

"He never had time to notify Haynes it wasn't on the stage."

Payson was groaning. Over his moans came the soft sound of the violin from the schoolhouse. Evidently, because of the festivities, the bullet-roar had not reached the celebrants.

"You go after the doc at the schoolhouse," Whiskers said. "I'll sit here with Payson."

Frank Gruwell ran into the night. Whiskers sat on the back steps. And now the sound of the violin was not a harsh sound. It was sweet and soft, filling the still warm air of the Wyoming night.

# RUNAWAY STAGE

By KEN JASON

**The kid's life didn't matter—not with that government gold and that freight empire at stake. . . .**

"WHIP" KINNEY stood with his saddle-bowed legs spread wide apart, with a deep-burning rage smouldering in his smoke-blue eyes.

"You might as well get a half-hitch on that ornery temper of yours," Happy Hollister warned him flatly. "You won't be making the Oro Pass run today—and that's final!"

Happy Hollister was a runty, sour-faced little man wearing two low-slung guns and a Texas Ranger's badge pinned to his barber-pole shirt. He had the look of a man that had never smiled in his life. But Kinney knew he was one of the best lawmen in the country.

"That's gov'ment gold the stage is carrying," the Ranger went on, hooking a rope-scarred thumb at the heavy Concord and the two teams waiting near the freight ramp. "It's consigned to a federal banking agency in Oro Pass. You're out on parole, Whip, after serving time in the pen for armed robbery. You being an ex-con, the judge has issued a writ restraining you from handlin' gov'ment money. I'm here to see you adhere to that there cou't injunction!"

As usual, a small crowd had collected in the Tres Puentes plaza to watch the departure of the stage, and Whip knew the Ranger's flat-toned words had carried to every man present. Hatred for the scrawny, grand-standing little lawman tightened his lips. His eyes pinched into a narrower frame. He was prison-branded, and Happy Hollister wasn't letting anybody forget that fact—least of all Whip Kinney!

On impulse, Whip shifted his glance to Ann Barney, standing near the office door. Since the death of old Jethro Barney in a slug-wagon accident near Killman Hill, the entire responsibility for Mountain Transfer's operations had rested on his daughter's slim shoulders. Resuming his old job after being released from prison, Whip had worked hard to

lighten her load in every way possible.

But now, as always, Whip was left with the impression that Ann Barney distrusted and despised him. Her glance was cool when it met his. Her shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly, and Whip looked back at the lawman with long, bitter lines drawn about his mouth.

"You know blame well this is another of Hugh Clug's tricks," he said grimly. "That court order ain't worth the paper it's written on. But with a hick, mule-headed star-packer like you to back it up, it will serve Clug's purpose. It will keep me from making the Oro Pass run today—and our only other driver is away on a freight run to the Jaulipas Hills."

The Ranger's bony, freckled face reddened with anger, and Whip knew his barb had struck home. The entire country was aware of the bitter rivalry that existed between Mountain Transfer and Hugh Clug's Staghorn Lines. And it was commonly felt that the "accident" in which old Jethro Barney had lost his life had been planned.

"There ain't no use in augerin', Whip," said the Ranger sourly. "You may be right, and the Lord knows I hate to do this to Miss Ann. But I'm honor-bound to do my duty, and I'll make it stick."

He hooked his thumbs in his sagging gunbelt and looked up at the tall, angry driver with an implacable will reflected in his faded blue eyes. The little Ranger was barely big enough to throw a shadow, but Whip knew he wouldn't back down from the devil out of Hades. He'd do his duty if it killed him.

"Staghorn's slug outfit has blocked me on Killman Hill every day this week," Whip said hotly. "We've had nothing but complaints. And if Clug can make us miss a run completely, he'll take over our franchise."

"Like I told you," Happy Hollister pointed out, "there ain't no use in augerin', Whip."

Whip Kinney had a trapped, helpless feeling as he faced the little lawman. Ann Barney's icy scorn, and the enmity of former friends who looked down on him because he was an ex-convict, had combined to make him feel like an outcast. And he knew he had to take this stage through—or lose his job and the last vestige of self-respect that had been accorded him for trying to go straight.

Happy Hollister must have sensed this, for his fingers brushed his gun-butts. He well knew the explosive temper in this yellow-haired, whip-lean man with the pallor of gray prison walls still on his face. He was tensed to draw if Kinney made a move toward the snub-nosed Navy revolver at his hip.

That's where the lawman made his mistake. Whip Kinney knew he couldn't beat Hollister to the draw. The man was plain poison with a gun. So Whip did the unexpected, his long shape suddenly exploding into action.

ONE knotted fist came up from his knees to crash against the Ranger's freckled jaw with the sound of a bull-strap smacking wet saddle leather. He hit Hollister again as the man staggered groggily and tried to go for his gun, and then drove a long, looping right into his belly that had the lawman gasping like a fish on dry land.

As Hollister dropped like a pole-axed steer, Kinney whirled and vaulted to the high spring seat beside the shotgun guard. He grabbed the lines and his hard howl set the teams in motion at a lunging run. A man broke from the crowd in front of Janoski's deadfall as they whirled across the plaza, and raced to swing aboard.

"I ain't hunting trouble," he yelled up at Kinney, as the driver lifted his leg to kick him loose. "Hell, man—I'm a passenger!" His broad, bearded face was laughter-wrinkled as he clung to the door.

Kinney forgot him and gave all his attention to driving.

Dust poured from the wheels like water and the stage rocked on its fore-and-aft springs as they circled into the rutted road leading east toward the high Oro Blancos. A single shot hunted after them as the coach careened into the first curve and righted itself on the downgrade.

Old "Casoose" Uvalde, the slim, graying Mexican riding shotgun guard, shifted his cud of chewing tobacco from one leathery cheek to the other and grinned at Whip.

"That loco Ranger will be high-tailing it after us as soon as he can straddle a horse," he yelled, lifting his voice to be heard above the rattle of the stage. "He don't like what you do to heem, *Señor*."

"*Es verdad*—it is true," Whip yelled back in the border Spanish he had spoken since he was a shirt-tail kid living on the Mexican side of the river. "But I couldn't just stand there and do nothing. This is Clug's work. He's bribed and intimidated our drivers until me an' Pete Rucker are the only ones left, and Pete is scared to tackle this Oro Pass run. He keeps remembering that old Jethro was shoved off into the canyon by one of Clug's slug-wagons. That's a rough way to die, Casoose."

The oldster shrugged. He had only one eye, and that eye was suddenly sober. "But you have only postponed the showdown with Ranger Happy Hollister—and with Clug," he answered gloomily. "That lawman, he is like the aggravated elephant, *Señor*—he never forgets."

Whip Kinney swore bitterly under his breath. As far as he was concerned, Hollister's name was synonymous with trouble. His eyes went bleak and hard as he thought back to the time, nearly two years ago, when he had first run afoul of Happy Hollister and the law.

KINNEY had quit his job with a jerkline outfit to haul passengers and fast freight for old Jethro Barney, whom he had known all of his life. Barney had been in a jam. Hugh Clug, new to the country but already a power, was fighting him tooth and toenail for business in the Oro Blanco district. And Clug wasn't particular about methods used.

Mountain Transfer's equipment was wrecked. Schedules were snarled and never on time. Drivers bribed or intimidated. Almost every wagon that left the freight yard met with an "accident" of some kind.

In desperation, Jethro Barney hand-picked men for their ability to handle fists and guns as well as the heavy slug-wagons and fast rolling stock. For a time, at least, he had held his own against Staghorn's ambitious owner.

Whip Kinney had been working for Mountain Transfer about a month when he was approached by Clug. Clug had offered to pay him to delay the Oro Pass run on Killman Hill. This was a long, dangerous grade that ended in a hairpin turn near the river, hugging the rim of a sheer two-hundred-foot jump-off. He had offered Kinney a thousand-dollar bonus to wreck the stage on the Killman Hill curve.

Whip Kinney had flatly refused. Thinking it over later, he had gone back to the Staghorn office and given Hugh Clug the hiding of his life. Then Ranger Happy Hollister had stepped into the picture.

The little lawman had arrested Whip, and Clug had charged him with stealing money from the company safe, which he claimed had been open at the time of the fight. Hollister found the money in Whip's soogan-roll, sewed into the lining of a quilt.

It had been a frame-up of the rawest kind, but a court had convicted Kinney on the two men's testimony. He had served a year and a day in the state pen. Now he was out on parole for good behavior, but he knew if Happy Hollister had his way about it, he'd be back in that pen to rot before they turned him loose again. The sour-faced little lawman was that cantankerous and ornery.

And he'd be trailing Kinney, the way old Casoose said, as soon as he could set a saddle. . . .

WHIP KINNEY thought of all this while the stage rushed down the long slope toward the first creek, bouncing through the road ruts, slamming around the curves, see-sawing constantly on its fore and aft springs. The teams were fresh and threw their solid weight into the harness with a vigor, and hoofs

beat at the hard-packed earth like an overtone of drums.

Old Casoose kept glancing over his shoulder to spot any pursuit. Whip held the ribbons loosely in his fingers, rage burning through him at the thought of the raw deal the Ranger had tried to hand him in the guise of a legal paper. They both knew Clug exerted an unholy influence over the local courts. Whip hated to believe it, but it looked like the Ranger was in cahoots with Clug, too.

The coach plunged down a last embankment and hit the shallow ford. Water splashed high and something cracked like a pistol shot, and then the team went at a clawing climb up the farther bank and swung north toward the desert and Oro Pass, which lay eighty miles away across towering mountains.

"If we could just run this stagecoach on a flatboat," said old Casoose, pointing to the nearby gorge of the Rio Grande, "we could float 'er around them mountains in half the time it takes us to cross 'em!"

The sun was up now and heat beat at them from a flat and desolate country broken only by cacti standing in sentinel solitude along the road. Dust whipped up like firesmoke and the coolness of the mountains standing high over Blanco Gap looked inviting. In another hour they were bucking the long grade up to the gap, where the land slid away like a gigantic uptilted table to the Rio Grande.

At ten o'clock they reached Hop Perry's ranch and changed teams. Within the hour they were across the gap and looping through a rough, cedar-studded canyon that would bring them out near Killman Hill. The stage slammed at full speed around the turns under Kinney's expert guidance, leather springs squealing and the big wheels cracking now and then as they jumped across the ruts.

Then Whip Kinney was riding the brake with his foot and sawing on the lines, and old Casoose had jerked erect with his scatter-gun ready for instant action.

A huge boulder had slid from the cliff and lay squarely in the middle of the road, blocking their way. Fresh dirt still dribbled from the overhang to mark its passage. The team shied around the boulder and the stage slewed to a stop with one wheel cut sharply and almost touching it.

"Look out, *Señor!*" was the old Mexican's growled warning. "This is a favorite road agent trick!"

BUT the minutes dragged by, and nothing happened. Whip finally swung down to study the boulder, and the passenger emerged from the coach to join him.

"What's up, driver?" he asked.

"Trouble, I reckon," said Whip shortly.

He studied the man for a moment. He was short and square-built, with calm gray eyes and a heavy beard. An old scar gashed his nose and his lips looked red against the blackness of his beard. He wore the wash-faded Levis and brush-scarred jacket of a working cowpuncher, but his hand, when he lifted it to stroke his beard, was smooth and unmarked by rope-burns or fence-patching.

Well, Whip told himself, he'd give him something to soil them pretty hands.

"We'll have to loop a couple of trace-chains around the boulder," he said, "and drag it off the road. You two will have to grab pry-poles and lever it toward the edge. With the jump-off on one side and the overhand on the other, there ain't room enough to swing the team."

"You're the boss," said the bearded man cheerfully, and stepped back to remove his jacket while Whip bent to unhitch the lead team.

Old Casoose swung down from the box, his squinted eye reflecting the worry he felt as he scanned the brushy hillside where anything could be hidden. His leathery face was grimed with sweat and alkali dust, and the black patch over the empty socket where his other eye had been gave him a sinister look.

Finally satisfied, he leaned his shotgun against the front wheel—and it was then the bearded passenger cat-footed up behind him and struck him a smashing

blow over the head with the long barrel of a six-shooter he'd snaked out from under his jacket.

One of the horses jumped when Casoose fell, and Whip Kinney swung around to face the black bore of a six-shooter aimed at his lank middle.

"Try for that sidehorn," the bearded man promised grimly, "and I'll blow you loose from your backbone!" Then he lifted his voice in a yell that carried up the slope.

"Jeeter! Kid! Bring the horses on down. Everything's under control!"

IT had all happened so quickly, and so smoothly, that Whip Kinney was caught completely off guard. He lifted his hands. It was hot in the canyon, but there was a coldness inside him as two men came down the brushy hillside, both of them leading saddled horses.

The slim, loose-lipped kid he had seen before around Tres Puentes. The Ringo Kid, he was called. His gray-green eyes were as shallow as bar mirrors and reflected about as much knowledge. He had the wolfish, trouble-hungry look of a gunwhelp who's trying to prove he's as tough and ready to howl as the rest of the pack.

Jeeter Luckett had worked for Mountain Transfer until old Jethro Barney had discovered he was also on Clug's payroll, and fired him. Jeeter was huge and thick-built, and he still carried the raw scar across his neck and jaw where Barney had laid into him with a bullwhip. A chunk of untrimmed roan hair showed below his sweat-stained hat. His little eyes were muddy slits of meanness.

"I reckon," said Whip thinly, "you aim to shove the stage into the canyon and make it look like another accident. Maybe that was the kind of accident old Jethro had when he was killed below here a month ago, Luckett. You swore when he fired you that you'd get even for that hiding he gave you with a bull-whip. I should have thought of you at the time."

"You're a quick thinker," sneered Luckett. "Sure, we done old man Barney in. But we got something else figured for you, sucker. You're going to be the fall guy ag'in—same as you were the time the Ranger found that money in your soogan-roll."

He laughed at Whip's surprise and turned to the bearded man.

"Tie him up, Anse, and toss him inside. Kid, if that old un's dead, just roll him over the embankment. I ain't got time to fool with no one-eyed Mexican."

"If he is dead," Whip blazed, "the three of you will hang from the highest limb we can find in the Oro Blancos—and Hugh Clug will kick alongside you!"

"Says you!" Luckett snorted.

"Says me!" Whip answered wrathfully.

"Ain't you found out yet," Luckett demanded, "that you're a prize sucker for buckin' Clug? Why don't you get smart? You could have made some real dough instead of spending that time in the coop for something you didn't even do."

Something inside Whip Kinney snapped. Luckett was brazenly admitting framing him. Whip's face went white with fury. And suddenly, he moved, lunging at the roan-haired man. Two years of pent-up rage and frustration and desperation were behind the wicked blow he swung at Luckett's head. But the blow never connected.

The bearded man said, "So you want to play rough?" and slammed his six-shooter barrel down across Whip's hat. The driver dropped in his tracks. . . .

THE coach was tearing down a boulder-strewn flat, wheels bouncing and slewing along eroded ruts that were little more than twisting cow-trails. Brush rapped at the axles and the hubs howled a strident protest at every turn. Now and then the big wheels crashed against rocks and fell jarringly back into the ruts, and pain cut like a knife through Whip Kinney's gun-hammered head.

He lay in a twisted heap in the bottom of the coach. His hands were tied behind his back and his booted feet were roped together. Dust sifted through the floorboards and clogged his nostrils, and his skull throbbed like a Comanche war drum. It was this constant, clawing pain

that brought him back to full consciousness.

Realization that the stage was underway was like a dash of cold water that cleared his brain. Then panic hit him like a mule kick in the belly. Where was Luckett and his two henchmen taking him? What had happened to old Casoose Uvalde? Why had the road agents stolen the stage? The futile questions poured through his mind as he fought frantically against the leather thongs holding his hands.

But the rawhide left his wrists bloody and scuffed without loosening in the slightest, and after a time he lay back with cold sweat bathing his body. He was in a tight, and knew it. He knew now that these men had killed Jethro Barney, and Luckett had admitted to the frame-up that had sent him to the pen. The burly roustabout would never have opened his mouth if he had thought Whip Kinney might be given a chance to talk.

Whip shivered a little at that. Desperation gave him the strength to double his legs under him and shove into a sitting position on the back seat. He stared out of the window at towering red walls that rose sheer and massive on either side of the racing coach.

Whip had punched cattle in the Oro Blancos, and knew the country well. He had been here before. They were careening down Cow Heaven Anticline toward the Rio Grande River, following a little-used road that led to a Mexican settlement across from the Willow Creek ford —Poso Verde, if he remembered the name of the pueblo correctly. His mind raced ahead with the rattle and interminable rocking of the stage.

Why had the road agents stolen the big Concord? He asked himself wildly. And the answer to that sent a chill spidering up his spine.

The renegade Luckett was using the coach to transport the heavy gold shipment across the border. Then, somewhere in the remote fastness of the Pelon Mountains in Old Mexico, he would wreck the stage and murder the driver. With old Casoose dead and unable to talk, it would be made to appear that Whip Kinney was the culprit.

The cold, clever brutality of the scheme turned Whip's blood to ice water. He knew that it would work. If Ranger Happy Hollister was really siding Clug, the law would make little fuss over the disappearance of stage and driver. Mountain Transfer would be ruined. Ann Barney would lose the franchise that old Jethro had worked so hard to save.

"And even if I got loose," Whip groaned in anguish, "I'd still have to answer to the law for killing old Casoose. God, what a mess!"

Then he thought of Ann Barney, and black despair tore through him like a red-hot branding iron. Ann, too, would believe him guilty, and somehow that seemed more important to Whip Kinney than the vengeance of the law or anything the road agents might do to him. He had the sick, helpless feeling of a man caught in a quicksand bog and being sucked slowly under. . . .

NEAR noon the stage dropped down a last rocky slope and came to a creaking halt near the river. Water was backed up in the shallow arroyo that led to the crossing, and Kinney knew a moment of wild elation when he saw that the Rio Grande was on one of its unpredictable rises.

Rain in the New Mexico mountains, hundreds of miles from here, had turned the lazy river into a muddy, roiling expanse of treacherous water that made the crossing uncertain. Luckett would be a fool to risk it. And if the road agents were held up here, Happy Hollister might overtake them.

Whip knew the Ranger would stick to his trail like a burr to a saddleblanket until he was behind bars, and suddenly, that seemed his only hope of getting out of this mess with a whole hide.

But the hope was short-lived. Two massive logs lay in the shallow backwater of the arroyo, used by Mexicans to ferry their cumbersome two-wheeled *carretas* across. At a curt order from Luckett, the Ringo Kid and Anse climbed from

the stage and mounted the two horses that'd been hitched on behind. Anse snaked his loop over one of the logs, taking a dally around his saddlehorn, and dragged it into deeper water.

"Float the other 'un in, Ringo," Luckett commanded. "Then use your catch-ropes to lash the logs to the axles. I've ferried more'n one chuck wagon across the Red and Canadian rivers going up the Chisholm Trail, and compared to them, the Bravo'll be a lead-pipe cinch!"

With sinking heart, Whip watched the logs floated under the coach. Once across the river, he knew his life wouldn't be worth a plugged *peso*. He had failed again! And of all the people in the world to be hurt by his shortcomings, it had to be Ann Barney. He wished with all the savage hopelessness of a trapped animal that he could get his back to a wall somewhere and something to fight with.

All he wanted was a chance to prove to old Jethro's daughter that he wasn't a crooked ex-convict who jinxed everything he touched!

The logs were floated under the axles and lashed into place, and Luckett climbed back to the box. Whip leaned out of the window as the Ringo Kid looked worriedly toward the south bank.

Beyond the river, on a barren plain that slid down from the Pelon Mountains to the narrow valley of the Rio Grande, was a drab, wind-whipped huddle of sun-blistered 'dobe shacks, making up the little Mexican cow town of Poso Verde. A dust cloud hung over the corrals there, where mounted *vaqueros* were shoving cattle into the laced-pole pens.

ANOTHER stirring of dust showed on the river road. The stagecoach had attracted attention, and most of the *pueblo's* saddle-colored citizenry were turning out to watch the crossing. Poso Verde was off the beaten path, its supplies brought in by mule train, and to the simple *peons* and *vaqueros* a horse-drawn coach looked like one of the miracles the padres preached about.

Then Whip Kinney saw the thing that had caused the Ringo Kid's concern, and leaned eagerly forward. For there were *soldados* in the crowd, barefoot, swarthy men wearing nondescript uniforms and armed to the teeth. One rider had a saber slung from his saddlehorn and silver insignia of some kind glittered on the collar of his tunic.

Hope, in the guise of a formless idea, began to gnaw at Whip Kinney. Excitement quickened in him. The black-bearded Anse, up to his knees in the silt-colored water, scowled at the growing crowd.

"We can't have trouble with the Rurales, Jeeter," he growled. "They're a hard-riding, straight-shooting pack of devils that like nothing better than a good fight!"

"Don't I know it," Jeeter Luckett answered from the box. "I've mixed it with 'em before, and come out on the losing end. We can't let them see Kinney or the gold, or they'll suspect something sure!"

"It's too late to plug Kinney and pitch him in the *rio*," the Kid put in, cursing a little wildly. "They're watching us like hawks."

"Untie Kinney and put him up here," Luckett directed. "He speaks their lingo. I'll ride like I'm the shotgun guard, with the muzzle of my rifle shoved in his ribs and my finger on the trigger. If he makes a false move of any kind, he'll be the first one dead!"

Neither the Ringo Kid nor Anse spoke Spanish, and they both protested violently against this move. But time was running short. They knew the stage would be missed when it failed to reach Rock Wells, the next stop after the gap, and that a posse had probably been organized to track it down by this time. A sense of growing urgency made the pair finally agree to Luckett's proposal.

The Ringo Kid cut Kinney loose, and boosted him to the box. Luckett handed him the lines.

"I understand Mex," the big renegade growled, "even if I don't speak it very well. Tell them greasers we're scouting out a new route for one of your stages.

Make it stick. None of 'em ever saw a stagecoach before, and they'll believe anything you tell 'em.

"Make it a good yarn, and we'll turn you loose with a horse under you as soon as we get past the town," he went on. Then he added, ominously, "But tip them Rurales' hand, and you'll get the first slug that's fired!"

Kinney knew the road agents would never keep the bargain. Once through the town, they'd shoot him down in his tracks and leave his body in some lonesome spot for the buzzards. But with Jeeter Luckett's rifle shoved in his ribs, there wasn't much he could do about it. His heart was hammering and his eyes were narrowed to slits of desperation as he kicked off the brake and yelled at the horses. . . .

THE teams churned into deep water. The stage lurched as the current caught it, and threatened to tip over. But the heavy logs dragged it down and it swung slowly downstream, wheels dragging at the bottom, as the horses bucked the strong current toward the Mexican side of the river. Then, just when it seemed the stage would be swept off the rock shelving that formed the crossing, the lead horses were over the narrow strip of swimming water and lunging for the shore. The wheels caught and they rolled into the shallows, where the logs were cut loose and dragged out on the bank for future use.

"Talk turkey, hombre," Luckett warned, as they drove on out on the bank and the crowd swarmed around them.

Kinney faced the yelling, waving mob of big-hatted Mexicans with what he hoped would pass for a cheerful grin. Mounted *vaqueros* were pounding up from the corrals now, and dogs and half-naked little *ninos* hung on the fringes of the crowd. The kids were wide-eyed at the sight of a real *coche*.

*"Que es, señores?"* the Rurale officer demanded, holding up his hand for silence. "What are you doing on Mexican soil? What is the meaning of this?"

He spoke in rapid, staccato Spanish.

WHIP KINNEY was acutely conscious of the rifle barrel shoved in his side as he stared down at the officer. The man was tall and lean in the saddle. Hair the color of yellow 'dobe dirt lay in a thick chunk at the back of his neck, and a mustache of the same dun color adorned his thin upper lip. His eyes were black and full of smouldering suspicion, and his hand rested on his revolver butt.

But for the uniform, Kinney would have earmarked the man a swaggering, swashbuckling *bandido*. That had probably been his former occupation, the driver guessed. Whip was aware of Mexico's curious way of selecting police officers for her hard-riding rural constabulary. When a *bandido* was captured, he was given the alternative of donning a Rurale uniform or being 'dobe-walled and shot. The scheme of setting a thief to catch a thief had worked out very well, and this hawk-eyed, hard-stamped hombre had the look of an unrepentant renegade if Whip had ever seen one.

"We are scouting roads for our company," he said, firing effortless Spanish back at the man. "There is a chance that we may send a stage to Poso Verde every week, since most of your supplies are brought in over the mountains. Your government is considering the matter favorably."

The officer seemed puzzled, and the tension was beginning to wear at Whip's nerves. "I am the Rurale *jefe* of this district," said the Mexican. *"Capitan* Cheno Sanchez. I have been told nothing about this proposed stage line connecting your country and mine."

"What the hell's going on here?" Luckett demanded, his low-toned voice charged with suspicion. "What's all the jabbering about, Kinney?"

Whip Kinney cut him a startled glance. *The man didn't understand their lingo, after all!* Hard on the heels of that realization came a feeling of elation that he could barely keep out of his voice.

"Shut up!" he growled. "You want to queer the deal?" And to the Rurale *jefe*, who was regarding him with equal sus-

picion, he said: "Why don't you ride into town on the stage with me? We can talk things over in your office."

He had switched back to Spanish, and the *capitan* answered in the same language.

"I'll do that, *señor*," he said, a little grimly, and stepped from the saddle to the wheel. A *soldado* took the reins and led his horse away, and he shouted a command to the rest of his dismounted troop.

"Fall in! We'll escort the *Americanos* and their vehicle to the *pueblo!*"

Jeeter Luckett observed this move with consternation in his eyes, and the Ringo Kid looked scared enough to go for his gun. Whip explained things hurriedly, and Luckett stepped back into the baggage rack. His baleful glance told Whip as plain as words that the driver would be a candidate for a sod coffin if anything went wrong.

The Ringo Kid started to curse in a high-pitched voice, then choked back the cuss-words when the *capitan* looked at him. The procession got underway. Dogs and half-naked kids ran noisily ahead of the coach. The *vaqueros*, straddling horses wearing the *La Cruz* brand, stirred the dust with rodeo antics and exploded a few cartridges to add to the gala air.

THE entrance into Poso Verde took on the aspects of a *fiesta* parade.

With several *soldados* hanging from the back of the coach, and the *jefe* riding beside him, Whip Kinney felt immensely better. Here was his chance to tangle Luckett in his own rope. He'd show that big renegade roustabout that it didn't pay to rustle a stagecoach from Whip Kinney! And if he worked it right, he'd catch Hugh Clug in the same loop.

"Them Chihuahua spurs you're sporting," he told the Rurale officer in urgent Spanish, "are raking the paint off a box holding twenty-five thousand dollars in gold! I'm the driver of this stage. These men held it up, killed the guard, and are trying to take the stage up into the Pelon Mountains where they can abandon it and leave my carcass under a cutbank.

"The company will reward you," he added, "for recovering the coach and the gold. I'll be obliged to you, personally, for saving my hide. And if you'll hold these three outlaws for the *gringo* authorities, I'm sure there'll be another reward forthcoming there. With that much *dinero*, you could buy a hacienda and let the Rurales go to seed."

Not a muscle moved in the *jefe's* face to betray that anything unusual was underway. The smile on his thin lips was smooth, enigmatic.

"Do not worry, *señor*," he said politely. "All will be taken care of."

The stage rolled into the town plaza and stopped in front of the low-walled prison that served as Rurale headquarters. *Capitan* Cheno Sanchez spoke banteringly to the crowd. In the same light tones he ordered his men to disarm the *gringos*.

Things happened fast. A soldier swung his rifle butt at Jeeter Luckett's head. There was the sickening thud of iron-hard wood on flesh and bone, and the big road agent tumbled headlong from the coach like a pole-axed steer. The black-bearded Anse was jerked from the saddle and knocked in the head in a similar manner. The Ringo Kid was not hard to subdue. A cuff in the face and he was spineless, cowering.

Whip Kinney grinned widely at the officer. "That was slick, *mi capitan*. Now I'll—"

The Rurale *jefe* had a pistol in his hand. "*Señor*," he said, "your story stinks. You have sold your friends out to the law in hopes of taking all of the loot yourself. But it will not work, *señor*. I will keep the gold myself. And tomorrow, at sunrise, you will keep a date with a 'dobe wall and the devil—*facing a firing squad!*"

THE prison was an old 'dobe corral that smelled rankly of sheep and sweaty bodies and the long-accumulated filth of countless prisoners. Two guards

patrolled the walls, armed with both pistols and rifles, and the inmates of the stockades were always in full view of the *soldados* since there were no cells.

A flag hung over the single building in the enclosure, which had been converted from a stable into barracks, and more soldiers lounged there.

Whip Kinney squatted on his hunkers in the shade of the west wall and stared glumly around him. Nearby lay Luckett and Anse, both nursing bloody, gun-hammered heads, and the Ringo Kid slumped farther along the wall. The Kid was green at the gills over the prospect of facing a firing squad.

Whip Kinney was sunk in the depths of despair. The hopelessness in his eyes was that of a man who's come to the end of his rope and found the knot unraveled. He had led the road agents into a law trap, all right—only to be caught in it himself. He was out of the frying pan into the fire, 'dobe-wall bait along with the renegades who'd gotten him into this mess.

Then he thought of Ann Barney, and what this would mean to her. Mountain Transfer would be ruined. She would have to sell out to make good the loss of the gold shipment. And with Whip Kinney dead in a nameless grave below the border, she'd always blame him for what had happened. Clug's scheme had failed, in part, but Whip Kinney would still be the goat.

That's what made Kinney as miserable as a hound-dog caught sucking eggs. He couldn't have Ann Barney thinking him the kind of two-bit coyote that'd steal from a girl. He had been loyal to his outfit right from the start, and been railroaded to the pen because he wouldn't sell out to Clug. The fact that Ann had believed him guilty had made it all the more hard to take.

Out on parole, he had been given his old job back. Then Jethro Barney was killed, and he'd worked harder than ever to help Ann. But she had distrusted him, despised him as a convicted criminal, and kept him on the payroll only because of Clug's ruthless tactics. Clug had made it almost impossible for her to get other drivers.

Today's happenings would prove the worst to her. She would look upon it as irrevocable proof that he had been a traitor to Mountain Transfer. In his mind's eye, Whip could picture the cold, cynical curl of her lips when she heard the news, the bitter "I-knew-it" gleam in her eyes, and the image cut him to the quick. Ann Barney was the real reason Whip had stuck with Mountain Transfer when the going got tough.

In desperation, he moved to where Luckett and the squat Anse were propped against the wall.

"We've got to get out of here," he said tightly. "We've got to get that stage back across the border!"

"If my head didn't hurt so much," Jeeter Luckett got out between clenched teeth, "I'd kill you with my bare hands! You tipped off that damn Rurale captain, else he'd never of knowed about the gold."

"That's water over the dam now," Whip answered. "We're all in this together, and we'll be standing ag'in that wall together in the morning if we don't think of something quick!"

He hooked his thumb at the bullet-pocked south wall of the stockade, where the hard-packed 'dobe dirt bore mute, dark stains.

Anse shuddered. "Kinney's right. We can settle our differences on the outside. Main thing is to save our hides. I ain't hankerin' for no dose of Rurale lead!"

"Maybe you're gonna fly out," Luckett suggested, grimly. "Them walls are ten feet high, and the guards up there ain't packin' no *sotol* poles!"

"It's past noon now," said Anse thoughtfully, "and I've never seen a dad-blamed Mexican that'd miss his *siesta*. If we just had a rope. . . ."

"I've got a knife," the Ringo Kid whispered, fumbling in the pocket of his bull-hide chaps. His face was drained of color, but there was an eager light in his washed-out eyes. "I wasn't searched very good. Let me get close enough to one of them greasers and I can run this between his ribs before he kin grunt!"

"Shut up!" Whip Kinney broke in, tensely. "I've got an idea. Kid, peel off them chaps. The rest of you gather around close so the guards can't see what I'm doing."

"This is a hell of a time," Luckett snarled, "to be cuttin' out leather dolls."

"Loop a half-hitch on that loose tongue of yours," Anse ordered, ominously. "Kinney ain't talking nonsense. The boy's got a head on his shoulders, 'stead of a holler gourd like yourn. He's aimin' to plait hisself a rope!"

ONE of the guards had already succumbed to the somnolence of *siesta* time. He leaned against a corner post, his sombrero shading his eyes, and drowsed through the heat of the day. The other *soldado* lazily patrolled the wall at the opposite end of the *carcel*, smoking a corn-husk quirly and staring into space.

Working with feverish haste, Whip cut the Kid's chaps into long, narrow strips. There was enough leather in each legging to braid a slim, strong, three-strand rope about fifteen feet long. The Kid knotted each in turn and held it while Whip wove the strands together, spacing the splices for added strength.

And while he worked, Whip's mind raced ahead. Even if they escaped, he felt certain that neither the stage nor the gold would cross the border. Something in the Rurale officer's eyes, in his smooth speech, had warned Whip that the man had no intention of turning the loot back to the American authorities. *Capitan* Cheno Sanchez did not look like one who would let a fortune slip through his fingers because of any scruples.

And Whip had to recover that gold. Even if Ann Barney did consider him a low, crawling thing that'd skin his own grandmother alive and tan the hide if he thought somebody would buy the pelt, he had to outwit the crooked Rurale *jefe* and get back across the border with the money somehow. That was the only way he'd ever convince Ann of his good faith.

"I'm going to steal that stagecoach right out from under that Rurale *capitan's* eyes," he told the trio. "You're going to side me. When we're clear of the town, you can head yonderly. I'll go on by myself."

"Are you crazy?" Luckett flared. "To hell with the stagecoach and the gold! I'm interested in nothing but my hide."

"You can count me out, too," said Anse. "Me and the Kid are stringin' along with Luckett—putting Mexico's dust behind us in a hurry!"

"You'll side me," promised Whip, with a lot more confidence than he really felt, "or I'll yell bloody murder and have them guards on our necks. Make up your minds in a hurry, boys."

"Why, damn your hide!" Luckett snarled, and lunged at Whip. But he swallowed anything else he had to say when the driver dodged, stepped back, and filled his lungs for a yell.

"Whoa! Whoa!" Anse interposed, hastily. "We'll side you, Kinney. Just take it easy until we get out of here."

"The first thing to do," said Whip, "is get over the wall. I think we can swing it. Then we'll grab horses somewhere, and guns!

THE little group under the west wall broke up, and drifted in pairs toward either end of the stockade. Under his jacket Whip carried a coiled leather rope. Anse, walking with the Kid in the other direction, carried a similar bundle.

There was a soft swish as a loop darted up toward the guard, and he was yanked abruptly from the wall. Before he could make any outcry, strong fingers closed over his neck. His pistol was snaked from the holster and used on his head with rough finesse.

Across the stockade a similar "accident" happened to the guard there. Whip jerked his loop from the *soldado's* limp form and tossed the rope over a corner post. He swarmed up the rope, with Jeeter Luckett at his heels. They dropped into the dust of the street and whirled, unseen, around the nearest building.

"Easy enough!" Luckett breathed, as soon as they were free of the stockade. "Now if we can just get some horses and head out of town. . . ."

Whip had counted twenty *soldados* in the Poso Verde detachment, and he knew the *vaqueros* and town's-folk could be counted on to take part in a fight if one started. But everything in the little *pueblo*, including the dogs and cats, seemed to be taking a *siesta*, and for once in his life luck seemed to be with Whip.

IT didn't last long. Approaching the corrals, jam-packed with several hundred brush-wild Mexican cattle brought in by the La Cruz *vaqueros* that day, they spotted a cavvy of horses hitched to a bed-wagon. A corral-hand was curled up in the shade of the wagon.

Jeeter Luckett picked up a heavy single-tree as he advanced on the sleeping Mexican.

Killing a sleeping man like slamming a steer in the head with a sledge-hammer was more than Whip Kinney could stomach. He shoved Luckett aside. He slid up behind the Mexican and grabbed him, one arm around his neck and the other gripping the Mexican's right wrist.

That's when Whip Kinney's luck ran out. He'd gripped the Mexican's right wrist, thinking that was his gun hand. But the man's left hand snaked under his brush jacket and brought out a snub-nosed .45 with lightning speed. The gun was tipping back over his shoulder to blast Kinney in the face when Anse moved in and knocked down his arm. The shot spattered dirt over the Ringo Kid's boots and roused echoes all over town.

The damage was done. Whip shoved the Mexican around and drove a straight, hard right to the jaw that knocked him down and out. Anse was still clinging to his gun hand, and now the bearded renegade wrested the gun from the *vaquero's* loose grip.

But panic stricken cattle had started to mill in the corrals, threatening to crash through the heavy fences, and yonder in the square sounded a babble of excited voices as the La Cruz cowhands came on the run.

"Open them gates and stand out of the way," he yelled at Anse, whirling toward the corrals.

Anse saw how things were shaping up, and swung open the double gate just as the first *vaqueros* came streaming across the plaza. Whip was on the back fence now, blasting away at the noses of the nearest steers. The first blinded, powder-burned *ladino* let out a pain-crazed bellow and whirled into the heaving cattle.

Bedlam broke loose in the plaza as men climbed awnings and poles and dived into buildings to escape the stampede, and some of the cattle, hemmed in by houses on four sides, crashed through swinging doors into saloons and ran amuck through shops.

WHIP KINNEY turned to find the Ringo Kid riding a horse and leading three others. He got one of the mounts, a sorrel, under him with a jump. While the Kid and Anse remained to load the sick and heaving Jeeter Luckett on a horse, he headed through the ruck of the stampede toward the police stable.

The place was deserted. The stage stood unguarded near the feed-pen, and the teams had been turned into the pen with the bridles jerked off and trace-chains hung from the hames. A smile of grim satisfaction tightened Whip's lips when he rode close and saw the gold box still in the boot.

Sanchez had certainly played into Whip's hands. The uproar had drawn the *soldados* on guard toward the center of the town. He knew they'd be back in a hell of a hurry when they ran afoul of the fear-crazed cattle. That meant he had to work fast. He grabbed a handful of bridles and started catching horses, hitching them quickly to the stage.

But the job was done, finally, and he swung to the box with a feeling akin to sheer elation. His hard howl sent the team ahead at a run, and he looked back over his shoulder at the thick, reddish dust boiling up from the center of Poso Verde.

But the glee was short-lived. He was about halfway to the river, with the stage rocking downhill at full speed, when he looked back and saw the three riders pounding up behind him. They had

emerged from a brush-choked arroyo behind the corrals, and Whip's heart dropped like a lead pellet into his belly when he recognized big, hatless Jeeter Luckett in the lead. The gun he'd grabbed from Luckett was empty, and the trio looked overburdened with weapons and bad intentions.

In the grip of near panic again, he looked wildly about for some avenue of escape. There was none. And to make matters worse, more horsemen streamed out of the shambles of Poso Verde and took up the chase.

THE KID and Anse snaked the logs into deeper water and swung down to lash them to the axles. Luckett remained in the saddle, covering Kinney with a Mexican carbine and scowling at the pursuit that was almost in shooting distance now. A bullet smacked into the water nearby as Anse straightened from lashing the last log in place.

The horses lunged into the harness, fighting the current as it clawed at them. A bullet smacked into the hand railing near Whip, and he flinched. Another caromed off a tire rim with a metallic whine that made a man's flesh crawl. The Kid's horse grunted like it'd been kicked hard in the belly, and went down. The white-faced outlaw was thrown clear and came up screaming.

*"I can't swim!"*

But neither Anse nor the burly outlaw *jefe* gave him a glance. The Mexicans had closed in to shooting range, and slugs dimpled the water like rain.

Whip Kinney heard the Kid yell and cut a desperate glance that way. Then the stage canted crazily under him.

There was just one thing to do, and Whip did it. One of the logs had a great hollow rotted out where a limb had been torn off. Another limb was short-chopped like the spread of an outrigger canoe. Unmindful of the bullets that splatted angrily around him, Whip started heaving everything that was loose into the hollowed-out log. He was throwing down the mail sack when a slug splintered the footboard almost at his feet.

Jerking erect, Whip stared wild-eyed at the little knot of riders that'd spilled from the arroyo on the north bank and were fanning out, shooting at him. A cold hand seemed to grip his heart and squeeze it dry. One of those riders was runty, redheaded, and sunlight splintered on a silver shield.

*It was Ranger Happy Hollister!*

Whip whirled to stare at the Mexicans on the south bank. *Capitan* Cheno Sanchez was in the vanguard of the irate mob, his epaulettes flashing in the sun.

With the weight shifted to the upstream log, the stage had righted itself. But while Whip searched wildly for some loophole in the law fence around him, an audacious *vaquero* on the south bank settled things by snagging a rear stanchion with his rope.

The Mexican was straddling a good horse, and it humped up under the saddle with its feet braced against an imaginary steer. The rope jerked taut, and the stage canted with Whip hanging to the luggage rack. Then the current struck the bottom with the driving force of a catapult, and the cumbersome body of the coach rolled off the logs with a crash.

Whip was thrown clear. He came up spewing water and debris.

A log floated nearby. A single shot hunted after Whip as he swam to the log.

Then the current swept him around the bend and out of sight. . . .

HUGH CLUG was a man of about forty, tall and slim, with dead-black eyes and dark jowls that a razor would never scrape quite clean. His thin-lipped mouth bespoke the driving will that had made him a power in this country in five short years. Under the wide brim of his white Saltillo hat, his smile was silkily triumphant as he faced Whip Kinney in the marshal's office in Oro Pass.

"I warned Miss Barney about keeping an ex-convict on her payroll," he said harshly. "She'll suffer for not following my advice. She'll have to sell her business to make good the loss."

Kinney was a sorry-looking sight. He had been bruised and battered by the

river, and blood made a rust stain in his rope-colored hair. His clothes were sodden, torn, and he had lost his hat. Shiny steel handcuffs linked his wrists.

"That's exactly the way you wanted it," he flung at Clug. "You framed me on that theft charge a year ago, after I gave you a licking you'll never forget.

"If Ranger Happy Hollister wasn't on your payroll, he'd chouse down the men who really held up the stage today—the Ringo Kid and Jeeter Luckett and a man called Anse. Luckett has been working as a roustabout in your Oro Pass depot. It was Anse who killed old Casoose."

"Now, just a minute," began the Ranger, but Jeeter Luckett had shoved to the front of the crowd.

"Me and the Kid," said the big man, "left Rock Wells this morning for Tres Puentes. We found where the stage had left the main road and headed down Cow Heaven Anticline toward the river. That looked damn queer to us, so we turned off the road and followed it. We overtook it just across the river, beyond the Willow Creek ford, and found Kinney heading yonderly with his passenger tied up inside. I reckon he aimed to make off with the gold.

"Me and Ringo were a-fixin' to jump Kinney when them damn Rurales rode up. They took us all prisoners, and the Rurale officer meant to keep the gold for hisself. But we broke out of their *carcel*, and helped Kinney steal the stage and the gold back from them. We meant to take him prisoner as soon as we were back across the Rio Grande.

"You fellows know the rest of it. Them Rurales jumped the stage at the river, and gold and everything was lost. I might work for a rival outfit, but I shore hate to see Miss Barney get a raw deal like Kinney is handing her. He's guilty gents, and ought to be strung up."

There was a growl of assent from the crowd, then Happy Hollister stepped out to face them. The little Ranger's freckled, bony face was twisted in a glum scowl.

"Still and all," he said sourly, "there's something wrong. The set-up stinks. I can't put my finger on it, but—"

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THERE was a flurry of movement in the crowd as someone shoved through.

It was Ann Barney, wearing a man's Levis and wash-faded shirt and sweat-stained old hat.

"Some of Clug's men are down in the street trying to work up a lynching," she said, hotly. "Since when is a man condemned in this country without a trial? And Whip Kinney is innocent!"

Whip Kinney stared at his boss, dumbfounded. He knew a sudden choking joy that he seldom had occasion to feel. Ann believed in him!

The surprise he felt was mirrored in Clug's eyes. The rival owner was staring slack-jawed at the girl. Then his jaws closed like a steel trap.

"You'll sing a different tune," he sneered, "when you learn this driver has driven your company into bankruptcy. This is men's business, Miss Barney, and you'd better leave and let us finish it.

"Your gold shipment is at the bottom of the Rio Grande, Miss Barney," Clug went on, relentlessly. "The stagecoach is wrecked. Your company can't stand the loss of the rolling stock—much less the gold. You'll be—"

"That's the part of this whole thing I can't figure out," broke in the little Ranger, as glumly as ever. "Kinney has turned out to be a mighty pore thief. Instead of the gold being lost, the way you gents figure, it's right here in the marshal's safe. So is the mail. Miss Barney won't have to worry at all about losing her contract.

"Kinney," he went on, "floated in here with the gold and the mail riding high and dry in a hollow log—and beat the regular delivery time by a good hour. He turned hisself in to the marshal, and that's the part of this cockeyed yarn that sticks in my craw like a sand-burr! It don't seem reasonable he'd turn the loot in, and give hisself up, after murdering his partner."

He shook his head sadly, as if the whole thing was beyond him.

"But he didn't kill his partner!" Ann Barney cried. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. He—"

"HE IS what you call the chunk of dynamite," a cool, liquid voice broke in, and Captain Cheno Sanchez, of Mexico's Rural Mounted Constabulary, stepped into the room. "He broke out of my jail, wrecked my town, and made fools out of the *cabrons* I have in my command. But maybe thees one can tell a few things you want to hear, *Señor* Ranger."

He shoved the wet, dripping Ringo Kid into the center of the room.

The Kid threw a fearful glance at Hugh Clug. His loose lips were shaking and his face was drained of color.

"I ain't got a thing to say," he got out jerkily. "These hombres fished me out of the river. I knowed they'd kill me if I didn't play along with 'em. But it was all a bunch of lies. I didn't have anything to do with robbing the stage!"

The shot came from somewhere outside, and the Kid crumpled in his tracks. He was dead before he hit the floor, with a bullet through his head. A man lifted his voice in the street.

"Grab that black-bearded *cabron!* He just shot into the marshal's office!"

There was a flurry of movement, and the quick drum of hoofs racing along the street and out of town. A few shots shattered the night's humid stillness. Then other horses pounded in pursuit.

"If he gets to the crossing," said the Rurale *jefe*, confidently, "my men will stop him. But it looks like he wiped out the state's witness, *Señor* Ranger."

"No," said Ann Barney, grimly. "I've been trying to tell you that Casoose Uvalde is not dead. They almost killed him, and then shoved his body into the canyon. But there was a shale slide that dumped him in the creek with no more than a few broken ribs. He'll live to testify against Luckett and Anse—and against Clug! He heard Luckett admit that Clug was behind this robbery, and that he framed Whip a year ago. He—"

Hugh Clug's face had turned a sickly color. He was clawing for his gun.

"Stand fast!" he yelled, before the gun was clear of leather. "I'll shoot the first man that moves!"

Desperation gave Whip Kinney the speed of a striking sidewinder. He lunged out of the chair, his solid weight striking the little Ranger off balance. His manacled hands gripped the Ranger's gun as the little man fell. He was bringing it up and into line when Clug triggered a shot at him.

The slug slashed across Kinney's side, wrenching him half around. The slamming force of that slug, ricocheting from his ribs, left him stunned, groggy.

But his own gun was in line now, and he squeezed the trigger. Hugh Clug was flung back as if some heavy weight had struck him. Blood gushed from his mouth as he sagged to the floor.

Suddenly sick and wretched, Kinney slumped down into the chair. It was like a red-hot branding iron pressed against his ribs. Sweat poured from his face.

Ann Barney knelt beside him. "It's all right, Whip," she was crying, trying to staunch the flow of blood from his side. "I won't let you down, Whip. It's just that you're—you're such a jinx!"

"Thees Wheep is somewhat impetuous, eh, *Señor?*" the Rurale officers was saying to Happy Hollister. "I had Clug covered all the time, but Whip took the play away from me—just like he did in Poso Verde when he stole the stage. But perhaps—" he smiled "—he deed not trust me to return the gold to the so beautiful *señorita!*"

Whip gulped, and nodded, and Happy Hollister grinned.

"Me and Sanchez are just like that," the little Ranger said, holding up two fingers. "We work together. He'd have returned the gold, all right, if you hadn't messed up the play."

"And Whip and I will be like that from now on," smiled Ann Barney, holding up two slim fingers. "Whip is the worst jinx I've ever known. But I've a notion his luck has changed for the better of late!"

And Whip Kinney, catching the warm glow in her eyes, knew that it had!

**BELIEVE IN LUCK?-$**

Carry a pair of GENUINE BRAHMA RED LIVE HIGHLY MAGNETIC LODESTONES! Legend reputes, Occult Oriental ancients superstitiously carried two Live Lodestones as MOST POWERFUL MAGNETIC "LUCKY" CHARMS, one to "attract" Good Luck in Money, Games, Love, Business, Work, etc., the other to "prevent" Bad Luck, Losses, Evil, Trouble, Harm, etc. Believe in Luck? Carry a Pair of these curious Genuine Brahma Red Live Lodestones! We make no supernatural claims. $1.97 Postpaid for the two,- with all information, 28c extra if C.O.D. Send $1.97 and save 28c. Satisfaction GUARANTEED or Money Returned. Order yours NOW!

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**RELINED AND TIGHTENED AT HOME $1.00**

NEWLY IMPROVED DENDEX RELINER, a plastic, builds up (refits) loose upper and lower dentures. Really makes them fit as they should without using powder. Easily applied. No heating required. Brush it on and wear your plates while it sets. It adheres to the plates only and makes a comfortable, smooth and durable surface that can be washed and scrubbed. Each application lasts for months. Not a powder or wax. Contains no rubber or gum. Neutral pink color. Sold on MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE. Not sold in stores. Mail $1 for generous supply, brush and directions and we pay postage. Charges extra on C.O.D. orders. Proved by 10 years of Consumer Use

DENDEX COMPANY, Dept. 17
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# The Most Amazing Factory-To-You Introductory Offer Ever Made to Our Magazine Readers

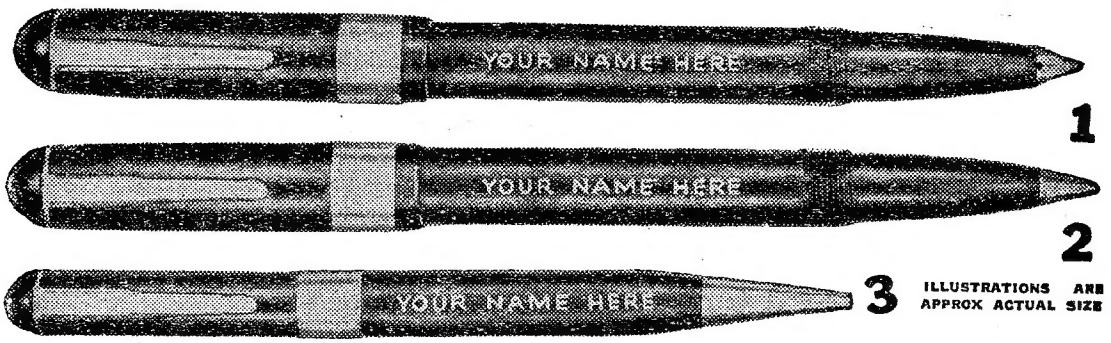
## Not One... Not Two... But ALL 3

**Yes, This Perfectly Matched 3 PIECE POCKET SET**

New automatic machinery inventions and manufacturing methods now turn out GORGEOUS fountain pens, ball bens and mechanical pencils with mass production economies unheard of 2 months ago! These tremendous savings passed on factory-to-you. Even when you SEE and USE, you won't believe such beauty, such expert workmanship, such instant and dependable writing service possible at this ridiculous price! Competition says we're raving mad. Decide for yourself at our risk.

**WITH YOUR NAME ENGRAVED ON ALL THREE WRITING INSTRUMENTS IN GOLD LETTERS . .**

**$1.69** *Factory To You*




1

2

3 ILLUSTRATIONS ARE APPROX ACTUAL SIZE

### 1 FOUNTAIN PEN

Fashionable gold plate HOODED POINT writes velvet smooth as bold or fine as you prefer . . . can't leak feed guarantees steady ink flow . . . always moist point writes instantly . . . no clogging . . . lever filler fills pens to top without pumping . . deep pocket clip safeguards against loss.

### 2 BALL POINT PEN

Has identical ball point found on $15 pens . . . NO DIFFERENCE! Rolls new 1948 indelible dark blue ball pen ink dry as you write. Makes 10 carbon copies. Writes under water or high in planes. Can't leak or smudge. Ink supply will last up to 1 year depending on how much you write. Refills at any drug store. Deep pocket clip.

### 3 MECHANICAL PENCIL

Grips standard lead and just a twist propels, repels, expels. Shaped to match fountain pen and ball pen and feels good in your hand. Unscrews in middle for extra lead reservoir and eraser. Mechanically perfect and should last a lifetime!

## 10-DAY HOME TRIAL ➧

## FULL YEAR'S GUARANTEE ➧

## DOUBLE MONEY BACK OFFER ➧

## SEND NO MONEY — MAIL COUPON ➧

Yes, only the latest manufacturing equipment and inventions could possibly cut production costs to bring a perfectly matched factory-to-you value like this. The matched barrels are practically unbreakable. Unheard of beauty, unheard of service, unheard of price and your name in gold letters on all three writing instruments as our special introductory gift if you mail coupon now! Send no money! On arrival deposit only $1.69 plus C.O.D. postage on the positive guarantee you can return set for any reason in 10 days and your $1.69 refunded. Could any offer be more fair? Then mail coupon today and see for yourself a new day is here in writing instrument value!

**M.P.K. COMPANY, Dept. 402-D**
**179 North Michigan, Chicago 1, Illinois**

Matched perfectly in polished, gleaming colorful lifetime plastic. Important we will pay you double your money back if you can equal this offer anywhere in the world! More important, you use 10 days, then return for full cash refund if you aren't satisfied for any reason. Most important, all three, fountain pen, ball pen, and pencil, are each individually guaranteed in writing for one year (they should last your lifetime). Full size. Beautiful. Write instantly without clegging. The greatest, most amazing value ever offered. Your name in gold letters on all three if you act now. Mail the coupon to see for yourself!

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### SPECIAL OFFER COUPON

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Okay, "miracle man", prove it! Send PERFECTLY MATCHED FOUNTAIN PEN, BALL PEN and MECHANICAL PENCIL with my name engraved in gold letters. Enclose year's guarantee certificate. I'll pay $1.69 plus few cents postage on guarantee I can return set after 10 day trial for cash refund. (Pay in advance and we pay postage)

ENGRAVE THIS NAME ON ALL 3 PIECES:

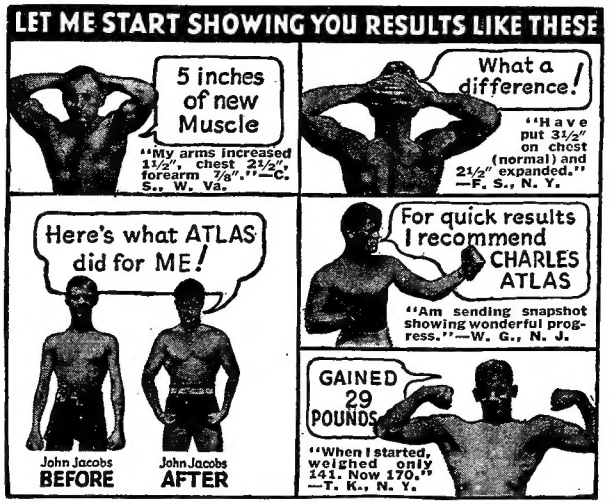
.....
(Print plainly....Avoid mistakes)

Send to (NAME) .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....

# Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*


LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE
5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞".''—C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress.''—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. K., N. Y.

**CHARLES ATLAS**

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in **competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.**

This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

## HERE'S WHAT ONLY 15 MINUTES A DAY CAN DO FOR YOU

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new beautiful suit of muscle!

### What's My Secret?

"**Dynamic Tension!**" That's the ticket! The identical **natural** method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny skinny chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or **contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your Strength through "**Dynamic Tension**" you can laugh at **artificial** muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—"**Dynamic Tension**"—will turn the trick for you. No **theory**—every exercise is **practical.** And, man, **so easy!** Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "**Dynamic Tension**" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

### FREE BOOK

**Everlasting Health and Strength**

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils — fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today, AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 145R, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 145R**
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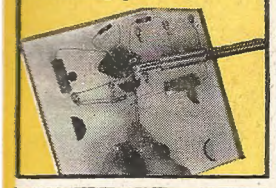
Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

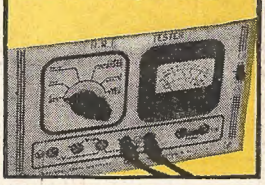
Address .....

City ..... Zone No. (if any) .... State .....

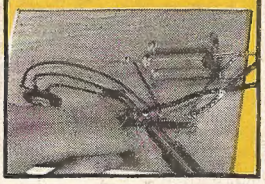
**YOU PRACTICE** Radio Soldering with Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts I send you. Get practical experience mounting and connecting parts.



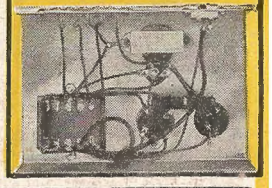
**YOU BUILD** this Tester with parts N. R. I. sends early in the course. Soon helps you fix neighbors' Radios and EARN EXTRA MONEY in spare time.



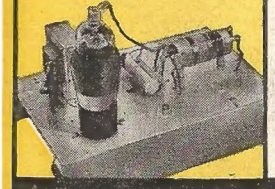
**YOU TEST** Radio circuits like this built with parts I send. Build special circuits; learn how to locate and repair circuit defects.



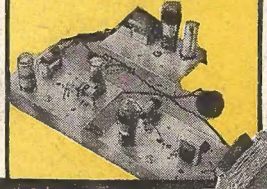
**YOU BUILD** Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds. Learn how to correct Power Pack troubles.



**YOU BUILD** this A. M. Signal Generator for more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



**YOU PRACTICE FM** (Frequency Modulation) experiments, get more experience with this Superheterodyne Receiver Circuit you build with parts I send.



## You Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE With This Superheterodyne Receiver

YOU BUILD THIS complete, powerful Radio Receiver that brings in local and distant stations. N. R. I. gives you ALL the Radio parts . . . speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, sockets, loop antenna, etc.

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